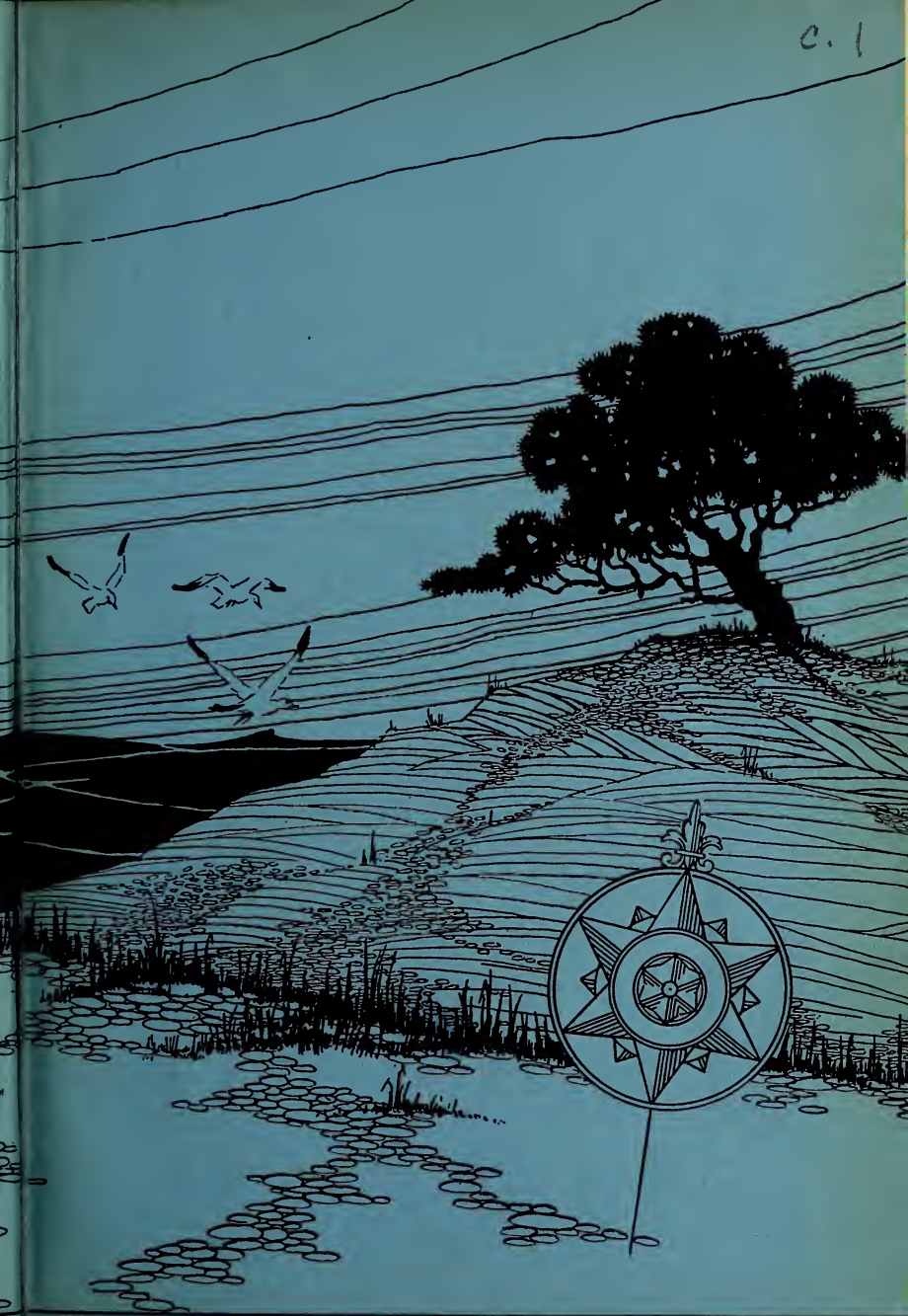




AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.





THE BLIND SHIP

AND ALL ON BOARD WERE BLIND

Jean Barreyre's Powerful Novel of the Sea.

By WILLIAM McFEE.

THE BLIND SHIP. By Jean Barreyre. The Dial Press. \$2.50.

Nobody can accuse the modern publisher of a reluctance to admit the excellence of his most recent productions. It has been said, with a certain justice, that he has encroached in his eagerness to apprise the public of his exploits upon the domain of the reviewer, and has even dictated, by various devices of publicity, what we are to think of his books. And I take it as a sign of saving grace that this urgency and extravagance of phrase, this riot of superlatives, this habit of suggesting that the general public is in a state of quivering excitement over his books, is declining and a sane, admirably written "avertissement," as the French say, a temperate prospectus of the work, is more likely to be discovered on the jacket of a forthcoming book.

The publishers of the present volume, however, are not to be denied. They state in so many words that "The Blind Ship" is "one of the great stories of the sea, that it is a new idea, "a thing so amazing it makes all previous tales of disaster on the high seas seem flat"; that the author "tells his terrific story simply; he compels belief." To the publishers "The Blind Ship" is "a masterpiece," "a triumphant work of art." No feeling here that perhaps it would be well to let people read it and judge for themselves.

Now there is no desire on the part of this reviewer, at any rate, to deny the publishers' manifesto. It may be perfectly true. After reading "The Blind Ship" I would not take a bet that this book is not a masterpiece or a triumphant work of art. It is a very remarkable performance. But I wish the publisher had been less certain about it in print. I wish all publishers would read and study the style

in the mystery of the prevailing obscurity things till then unknown. Wonder of wonders, they learnt by the simple touch of their fingers the difference

between the silk of daylight and the gossamer of night."

Pathetic indeed is the account of the sailors becoming the victims of a sort of aural mirage. They swear they can hear the engines of a steamer coming along. They scream to each other to stop screaming so that they can hear again. But they cannot agree as to which side of them the sound lies; and presently, in despair, the delusion is abandoned.

Perhaps the most wanton defect of the story is the episode of the tramp steamer approaching and even sending a boat to come on board. The captain of the tramp, hearing from one of the dreadful scarecrows that they are all blind, having caught the disease from each other, at once abandons them, makes no further effort to take them off and leaves them to their fate. This is so entirely preposterous and gratuitously harrowing that I can only explain it by assuming a pressing need in the author's mind to extract the last drop of horror from his conception of a blinded crew. Unfortunately the book has to be read by human beings, and as human beings we are equipped with feelings which tell us that such an episode is incredible. Moreover, it is unnecessary. Already the nerves of the sensitive reader have been touched to the quick by the fact that a vessel had already passed the Sea Shine, noting in the log that she failed to reply to signals. Perhaps it would not be fair to indulge in hypercriticism, but a commander who reported that he could not approach a ship in distress "being hampered by thick weather" and yet adds that his helmsman made out night signals during "broad daylight" would be courting investigation of his movements and intelligence.

Yet the story, tragic and magnificent, survives even an unfortunate last chapter, which ought to be deleted from all future printings. "The Blind Ship" stands out for me as a remarkable novel of the sea, with numerous unnecessary blemishes, but for all that with a theme of imaginative power and tragic grandeur.



The
BLIND SHIP

By
JEAN BARREYRE

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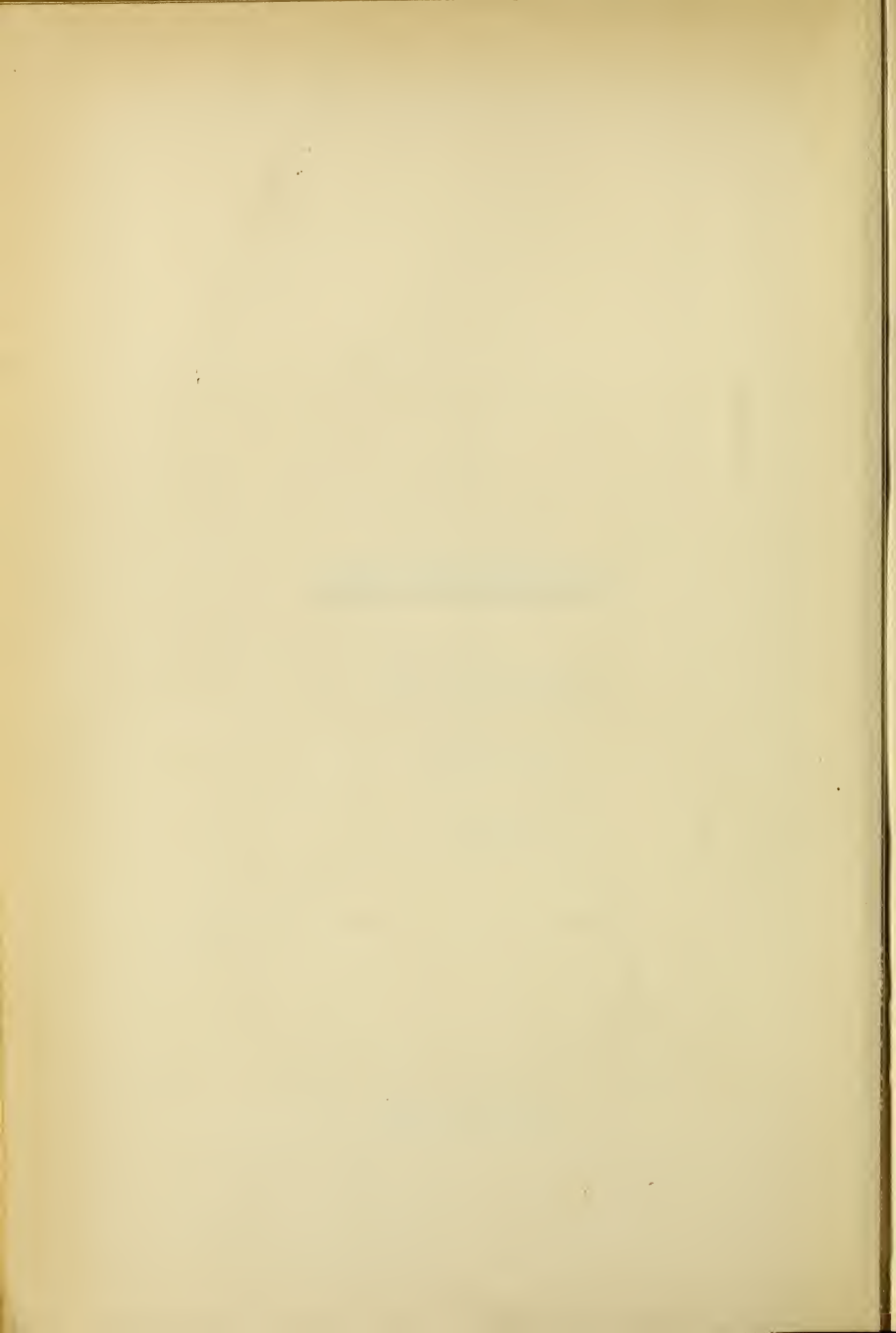
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I

IN its passage through the icy blackness of the night the wind of the morning had become congealed, and now it descended heavily upon the ocean with a swoop as of some vast bird.

It swept through the harbour, scattering the dust and cinders from the tops of the casks and barrels, smiting the rhythm of the rippling water, cresting the waves with silver.

All awaited its coming. For some time voices had been passing backwards and forwards through the mists, which ever and anon veiled the light of the lanterns.

Aboard the three master, *Sea-Shine*, Captain Wilcox, the crew were on the alert. They began to hoist sail. The topsmen scurried about the masses of coiled rope, which exuded moisture like sap. They darted

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up the rigging; on all sides blocks shrieked and rattled.

The vessel's bulk increased, its unfurled sails bulging out in half-circles; with its movement the water in which it floated showed a changing hue. A single hawser alone held the vessel to the land.

Leaning over the taffrail Captain Wilcox surveyed the proceedings. He appeared indifferent to the movements of the crew; but before his half-closed eyes the images of things perpetually flitted, like swallows floating about their nest at dusk. This was the skipper's way of observing his men. He fancied he saw through them, sounded them, searching their very souls in the folds of their flesh, they, of course, being unaware of the process. The men, being fully conscious of this little peculiarity, swelled with false zeal and affected gestures; they were full of guile. The captain judged his crew only by their behaviour aboard ship: when they were at work

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and when, as on this morning, he pretended to see nothing in particular.

The copper rings grated against the masts, the bellying sails were eager to be off. And now they were off, and the *Sea-Shine* accompanied them. The wind bore the vessel swiftly towards the open sea, where it collected clusters of sea-gulls circling about the rigging.

Jimmy, one of the crew, passed close to where the captain stood. He opened his capacious mouth in a broad grin, but suddenly thinking better of it, assumed the mild expression of a maid-of-all-work, and closed it. He could hold in his fist the corner of a restive sail flapping in the breeze, but the random thoughts flapping about in his head, so light that they lacked all substance, he was unable to hold. Jimmy was a simple soul.

Another young sailor, Dick by name, leapt down from a swaying rope ladder. He stretched his long tanned body and his bare

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arms, licked the sweat from his lips, and then, presto! was off on a new tack. He was a nimble fellow, with all the agility of youth. Just now his face shone in the rays of the rising sun; he had the sort of eyes which made women fall in love with him. But, for himself, he preferred the sea to women; he was in love only with the sea. In the wildest weather he offered a jostling shoulder to the worst fury of the elements.

Besides this pair there was a group of new hands, already becoming accustomed to the ship. Although hailing from different countries they all looked alike. A sea-faring life had somehow given them the same high shoulders and bulging chests, and they all had copper-coloured skins save one fellow, a Russian, who from his bald head to his podgy hands had preserved his original pinkness. There are certain skins which the sun seems powerless to burn. This Slav was a good sailor, the equal of his neighbour, a Dane,

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who, though slow, had a deftness which it was pleasant to watch.

The captain congratulated himself on having chosen his crew without interference from the owners, who were easy-going, stay-at-home people in Liverpool, given to taking life easily and content with the profits he brought them.

Wilcox always enjoyed the proceedings incident to embarkation. As he stroked his hair, damp with spray, his features wrinkled in silent laughter.

But his mood altered when an unhappy pig, loudly squealing and with ears flapping, was kicked up the gang-plank. He had to step aside to avoid it. Then a crateful of fowls set up an uproar.

"Get all that live-stock below! Look sharp!" growled the skipper; but in so low a tone that he might be talking to himself.

But the boatswain heard, and answered briskly, "Ay, ay, sir!"

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At this point the mate came genially alongside his chief. The mate's face wore a perpetual smile: it served him on all occasions, and no one who knew him would have been in the least astonished if he had worn the same ironic smile in announcing, "I have just lost my wife, and am terribly unhappy."

The mate's garb was elaborate: it fairly equalled that of the dressiest officers of the Royal Navy, who, as everybody knows, are swathed in gold-lace up to the chin. Like them he carried himself very straight; his features were clear-cut, and he had the white hair of an admiral. This same white hair, conjoined to a youthful face and his enigmatic smile, lent the mate distinction.

The time had been when Mr. Eric Brand had commanded his own ship, and he never would have embarked on this commonplace vessel but for a personal misfortune of which Wilcox vaguely knew the history, for it was common gossip in most of the ports of the

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world. The captain held him in high regard, but was secretly a little jealous of his authority and prestige.

"We are going ahead swimmingly, sir," said the mate.

"Are we? You are easy to please, Mr. Brand," was the captain's comment.

For the moment he was surly and impatient, and turned his back. After all, for all the mate's magnificence and ease of manner he, James Wilcox, was the Master.

And as if the ocean itself was ready to obey his behests, the vessel began to put on greater speed.

A heavy freighter passed, loaded with cargo and black with smoke. A returning brig, with discoloured sails, crossed the freighter's bows, making its way along painfully.

"There goes an old-timer," remarked the mate.

The captain stared at the sailing-ship fixedly, and then sighed.

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"They don't build sailing-ships any more—they don't '*pay*.' Where will you find anything better afloat than a fine old sailing-ship? Mine holds out yet, thank God. Never will they get me to navigate a steamer—never."

"Dull work," hazarded the mate.

"If you call it '*navigation*,'" added his chief.

The captain left his post of observation, grumbling inarticulately to himself, and sought his cabin. There he laid hands on the ship's log, fixed his horn spectacles, which were practically reserved for this special purpose, on his nose, tested his pen with a stumpy fingernail, and forthwith proceeded to make an entry in the volume before him.

The business of departure being over, the crew sprawled about their quarter of the ship, their backs bent, hands on knees, puffing pipes and cigarettes.

At the door of his galley, in a dirty apron and a knife in his hand, the cook squatted over

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a pot half filled with potatoes. He regarded the whole crew, whom it was his business to feed, with resentment: merely to look at them lounging about at their ease invariably angered the cook. In fact, he cherished a deep resentment against the whole world.

For Dame Nature, in giving him birth, had played a sad prank upon the cook: she had created a being divisible into three almost equal parts—a monstrous head, a diminutive body, and absurdly short legs. The natural growth of years had wrought little transformation in the cook's person. As he was in infancy, he remained in manhood.

Notwithstanding the disgrace thus put upon him by Nature, never was any being more ambitious of consideration from his fellows. He could not endure the least slight. If any one so much as dared to rumple his hair, he was furious. He insisted upon being treated with the utmost respect, and only signed on in

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ships carrying a scanty crew, because there would then be fewer critics of his physical peculiarities.

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One morning a big steamer passed close to the *Sea-Shine*, bulked before it, cutting off all the horizon with her bows. All one could see was a long series of bolts riveted on a sheet-iron wall; it was like going through a tunnel, and when daylight re-emerged it unrolled like a silver ribbon.

The limp sails of the vessel filled with a sudden gust of wind, and with a shock she again ploughed the sea.

The shock made the captain slightly unsteady on his feet. He cast a long glance at the swiftly-moving monster and its thick fumes, and felt oppressed by the proximity of this great iron fortress which seemed to invoke his homage. He pictured contemptuously her captain and officers sleeping at their ease,

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without a single care. As for the crew—these gentry, pampered by the labour of machines—what kind of mariners did you call them?

“Mechanics!” growled the captain, answering his own question.

The incident of the big steamer created a certain amount of talk amongst the crew. One sailor seized hold of Jimmy and began forthwith to dilate upon the charms of life on board a liner.

“What’s a fellow like you doing ’ere? You’re kept running up and down all day with no rest—with ’ardly time to breathe! We must be idiots, chaps like you and me, to go on with such a dog’s life. Now, aboard a big steamship you’re treated like a gentleman. In the morning you ’ave a quiet smoke o’ your pipe; at noon you ’ave a cigar; and in the evening you smoke all the blinkin’ cigarettes you get. All day long you pick your teeth and polish up the brasswork with a bit of

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chamois-leather. You've always got one 'and in your pocket, so to speak. You're always neat and tidy. You sport a silk-ribboned cap on your bloomin' 'ead and wink at all the pretty girls amongst the passengers. There's a life for you!"

For the nonce Jimmy lent an ear to the enchanter; he looked after the splendid liner in its effortless progress, resembling a shooting star, but in his heart he felt no lasting regrets.

The liner's bulk dwindled afar, and soon became an insignificant point on the imponderable horizon. Jimmy could hardly have explained, even to himself, why he preferred his present way of life. The bother of thinking generally led him to apply a single indirect formula to express his reasons for his reason.

"W'en you come to think of it——" he would say.

And in this philosophical spirit he bestirred himself at his job, putting his back into it.

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One hardly ever saw him mixing with his fellows. He preferred to keep to himself. When ashore, through some inexplicable antipathy, he was always quarrelling with other sailors; and when he did so seriously they were likely to have their teeth broken by his burly fist.

The *Sea-Shine* soon quitted the regular sea-routes.

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“Captain! Captain!”

The skipper stopped smoking and stared indecisively at the tumbler of grog before him. The voice continued to call him. He was so taken aback at this unusual summons that he laid his pipe down on the table. What did it mean? In the whole course of the trip nobody ever called him, unless it were to solve some difficult problem of navigation.

His fingers twitched, as if they manipulated

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a sealed telegram which he dreaded to open. Yet there was nothing to augur any special danger at hand.

The captain rose heavily, banging both fists on the table. At the door he suddenly thought of his pipe, retraced his steps, placed his pipe again in his mouth, where it commonly remained alight for hours at a time.

Immersed in a fresh cloud of smoke he regained his tranquillity. On deck he was surprised to see that the men were no longer at their posts. Captain Wilcox advanced a few steps more, and then the spectacle which greeted him brought him up short. The shrivelled carcase of a man lay stretched out. Its face was pitted with bluish spots and its lips were tightly stretched over protruding teeth of the quality of yellow ivory: the body seemed emptied of everything which could have sustained life.

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The captain approached, taking up his stand at the side of the mate, who had just arrived.

"Well?" he demanded.

"They found him in the hold, sir," explained one of the sailors; "he was wedged in between two sacks."

"Looks like a Lascar," declared the mate. "He must have starved to death."

The skipper bent down over the corpse. With his fore-finger and thumb he opened the dead man's eyelids. To his piercing glance the contracted visage opposed a weird, diabolical cunning, manifest even in death.

The captain rose. This supernatural look of intelligence on the part of a corpse was disturbing.

With the eyes of the crew on him he was glad to be momentarily enveloped in the smoke of his pipe, which eddied in the wind. He

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went through the act of swallowing, his throat bulging curiously before he spoke.

"Search him!" he said at last, indicating the body. Having no further order to give, the captain turned on his heel, letting fall the ashes of his pipe.

They ransacked the Lascar's scanty raiment, but found no paper of any kind. The mate questioned the crew. At first they were doggedly silent, according to the immemorial custom of sailors when they smell the odour of the law; but, finally, one of them, partially prompted by a desire to show off, related what he knew.

He testified that the day before the ship left port they had had a glimpse of a shadowy being on two legs pursued by a crowd of people. He and some boon companions who were having a farewell drop together at a tavern, for which they were none the worse, joined in the chase as far as the quay. There they saw the

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strange human shadow apparently plunge head first into the water, and instantly melt away—"just like a lump o' sugar, sir."

It was his opinion, and that of his fellows, that the shadowy individual he described was no other than "this 'ere bit of dried flesh on this 'alf-scraped skeleton." The man added that was all he had to tell—not a word more, not if he was to hang for it.

The mate, taking due note of the evidence, decided that the man spoke the truth, and that the mysterious quarry was indeed this Lascar sailor, who had subsequently climbed aboard and contrived to secrete himself on the ship. He was, beyond all doubt, one of those stowaways which are the bane of every port—idle wretches who hide themselves in the hold of a vessel, and without undue effort pass the long days of the voyage, feed themselves, sleep in comfort, and even smoke. At this latter pursuit they occasionally set fire to the ship which

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so agreeably lodges them, and themselves perish in the flames.

"Why did he choose *my* ship?" asked the captain querulously.

The mate was at a loss to answer the question. His chief made it clear that the whole episode was most disagreeable to his feelings.

"I suppose it'll have to be put down in the log," he told the mate, in disgust.

The captain had one peculiarity common to many men of action: they will go serenely for days during a crisis without sleeping, uttering no complaint, but become wretched over trifles which upset their routine.

To have to worry over the escapade of one unauthorised vagabond who had been a passenger for such a brief time on board his ship, when there were countless thousands of such rascals in the world, sickened him to the very pit of his stomach.

On deck in the twilight the sailors gravely discussed the dead man. Opening the door of

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his galley, the cook joined in the talk, his contribution taking a highly characteristic turn. He announced it as his opinion that human life was not safe on the *Sea-Shine*—that people were foully murdered on this ship.

As he spoke a great cauldron of water boiled over on the stove, and there was a flood of escaping steam. A cloud of vapour wreathed itself fantastically about the head of the dead man as he lay there, giving it a sort of resemblance to one of those swarthy Oriental martyrs one sees in the old primitive paintings.

The sailors soon made short work of their mysterious visitor.

They flung the body of the Lascar stowaway into the sea. Instantly the fishes were tumbling and flashing about it, for all the world like pieces of silver poured from a sack.

II

THE encircling waves formed themselves ceaselessly, expanding and dissolving with scarce more tumult than breaking crystal; through their midst rode the *Sea-Shine*.

The crew were assembled in the fore-castle. Of all vagabonds, sailors are most slaves to habit. More than other men do they dwell together intimately. The single small lamp which gives them light, smaller even than the lamps in their cottages ashore, embraces them all in its feeble glow. They group themselves from choice more compactly than landsmen; the breath of the words they utter is felt on the cheek and forehead of the rest; they habitually deliver commonplaces into their listener's ear as if they were divulging momentous secrets.

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To-day they were most socially inclined, but in the general cordiality the cook had no share. He showed himself surly, spoke to nobody, and seemed vexed. None knew the reason—unless it had something to do with the dead Lascar. From this behaviour of the cook the whole crew suffered. He went about with tightly-compressed lips, so as not to be betrayed into any sort of response to their smiling good humour. Any advances on their part he haughtily checked. His malice went so far that while serving them out soup he cunningly spilt the boiling liquid on their hands. The victims snapped their fingers in the air and swore. Their cook showed the most innocent countenance, but his internal jubilation over his malicious exploit became so violent that tears started into his eyes as if he had bolted a pinch of pepper.

Seated at table, spoons upraised, their faces moist with the steam of hot soup, the crew freely canvassed the vicious character of the

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cook. He was a vindictive little beast; he was contemptible; two or three swore that, sick of his conduct, they would finish by strangling him.

It would serve the beggar right, declared another, but such a thing was not done so easily. Talk was cheap. This of course increased the threateners' violence, and they actually had to be held back from attempting homicide then and there. In disgust they returned to their places, uncertain as to their exact line of procedure, shaking their heads and scraping their plates with a terrible clatter.

Meanwhile the cook listened at a prudent distance to all this talk. The noisy menaces of the crew filled him with affright. As they grew in violence, his teeth began to chatter, and with bulging eyeballs he retreated, knife in hand, to the doorway of his galley, muttering vague threats of what he would do if attacked.

In the course of the evening it happened

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that a sailor, his eyes gleaming with mischief, approached the galley. The cook held his breath; fear caused his heart to miss a beat. The sailor feigning indifference, humming softly to himself, passed on slowly, serenely, on to the deck, and the wide, starlit spaces of the night.

Regaining his courage the little cook looked boldly around; his eye followed the nocturnal prowler narrowly; as nothing happened he breathed normally again.

The world was too much for the cook—or, to put it another way, he was too small for its immensity. So utterly disproportionate was he, that of its cosmic harmony he could realise nothing, the imposing spectacle of the night to him was meaningless. He had a grudge against everything—even God. When he contemplated the firmament, he felt only a raging desire to seize the stars and squeeze their substance away, as if they were so many fragile icicles.

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But power of any kind at all was seemingly forbidden him. He writhed in his helplessness.

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It so happened that on this particular day Captain Wilcox, seated in his cabin before a glass of prime old rum, searched the depths of his heart and found optimism enough to conclude that life, after all, is agreeable. It is a sort of conclusion which might be reached by any poor devil of a philosopher who has discovered sixpence in the gutter.

Whistling a tune he tossed the ship's log negligently on to the table and sketched a sort of jig with his toes. On the appearance of the mate the captain seized a tumbler and offered it to the new-comer. From a huge demijohn, which he kept carefully hidden in a locker, he poured out a generous quantity of rum.

In imbibing the liquor the captain and the

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mate regarded each other through narrowed eyelids, after the ecstatic manner of true connoisseurs the world over. They smacked their lips over the rum, which indeed had a delicious flavour. Exuberantly clapping his companion on the shoulder, the skipper demanded his opinion of the stuff. Had he ever drunk a better drop of prime old Jamaica?

Thus questioned, the mate shook his head with an air at once serious and richly charged with significance. It was the air of a *bon viveur* and true man of the world. He was about to deliver a considered judgment when a noise outside the cabin-door caused both men to pause. Someone was descending the companion-way, pausing at each step, as if fearing to tumble headlong. Hearing these unexpected footsteps, the captain and the mate, glasses in hand, stood transfixed. There are moments of mysterious premonition, when the very air appears to announce a bearer of evil tidings.

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It was the boatswain; he halted before the closed door, pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose. The captain gazed at the door with a queer inquietude at his heart for which he could not account.

Clapping his tumbler down upon the table he took a step forward and then opened the door to the boatswain.

"Well! what is it, eh?" he demanded roughly. He generally spoke with an exaggerated brusqueness. Many leaders who pass their time in close association with their subordinates adopt this bullying tone. The idea is that a display of violence ensures an aloofness of relationship; they are of a different order of beings, and so are less criticised; their violence impresses those who are under their orders.

The boatswain bent his head, as much out of countenance as if he were avowing a fault. He advanced a step, glanced at the mate in

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perplexity, and found in that officer's calm, smiling gaze a certain moral support. The boatswain thereupon threw off by a gesture all responsibility for what he was about to announce.

"The Dane's gone sick, sir," he said.

The captain, who was a big man, drew himself to his full height. He stared malevolently at the intruder.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked, with a frown. To him it was next to impossible for anyone to become ill in absolutely good faith.

"The Dane's an honest fellow enough," volunteered the mate, as if in answer to the captain's thoughts.

"That's so, sir," corroborated the boatswain.

Wilcox nervously shook the contents of his tumbler and swallowed the liquor at a gulp. But his pleasure in drinking had vanished.

"I'd better go and see him at once, sir," said

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the mate. He took up his tumbler; when he had swallowed his drink he made for the door.

"Find out just what silly notions the fellow's got in his head. You might tell him I don't want men coming aboard my ship for a rest cure. If he really can't, or won't, stir you'll have to plan how to replace him. Don't be afraid to rouse the crew up to a sense of their duty. The boatswain's altogether too easygoing."

When, after a protracted absence, the mate returned to the cabin he was unable to furnish any explanation to the illness of the Dane.

"He is certainly sick," he said, "and that's all I can tell you, sir. I can't find out anything more. Men's insides are as big a puzzle to me as the bottom of the sea. Everything upsets my judgment in these matters, whenever I ever give any. One thing was odd. I fetched my lantern up to his face and he yelled out just as if I'd stabbed him in the eye."

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As on the next day the afflicted Dane still kept his berth, the captain decided to pay him a visit. As he descended, the rope ladder groaned with his weight. By way of echo another groan issued from one of the bunks.

The sick man complained bitterly. It appeared that all noise violently affected his nerves. He heard the sea beating—beating incessantly with the persistence of a drunken longshoreman at a tavern door. He covered his face with his hands, and then peered at them as if he expected to see them drenched with blood.

Of course all this behaviour might be simple play-acting. Coming close, with his spectacles on his nose, Captain Wilcox gripped the collar of the invalid in order to the better examine him. The gesture upset the man completely; he broke into a profuse sweat and ripped out a string of oaths. He sat up in his berth, his fist clenched, threateningly breathing resentment against the intruder.

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"What's the matter with you?" roared the captain, who always suspected trickery.

The Dane, now half-risen, drew up his blanket, rolled it as if in agony against his stomach and, with his body exposed, moaned repeatedly without, however, specifying the source of his ailment. He apparently endured such torment that he rocked to and fro, striving to allay the pangs of a relentless agony. He continued thus, balancing himself in his berth, in a sort of moaning sing-song, without replying to the captain, oblivious to all but the pain which racked his whole body.

Then suddenly, no longer able to support the torture, he flung himself backward, beat with his fists, uttering loud cries and cringing and doubling in his cot, as if seeking to escape the clutches of some implacable enemy.

"He keeps us all from sleeping, sir," spoke up a voice from a neighbouring berth.

Wilcox, who detested all complaints, turned

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such a severe eye on the topsman who had dared to utter this remark, that the delinquent shivered as if he had received a douche of cold water. In his embarrassment no imbecile ever so totally emptied his countenance of any expression whatsoever.

The captain resumed his place beside the sick man and made a further effort to discover the nature of his ailment. But whatever it was, it was one as baffling and as invisible as Time itself. How could he find out anything? Wilcox remained bent over the berth, eager to construct some sort of diagnosis; but in vain.

Several of the crew drew near and hung about him. A decision of some sort was awaited. If a captain may not know everything, he is at least expected to act.

"It is nothing." The captain delivered this announcement in a firm voice. On second thoughts it occurred to him: Ought he to acknowledge that nothing had baffled him? He

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therefore added, "He only wants a little rest. He must sleep."

Whereupon the Dane loudly protested that he couldn't sleep any more—he never would sleep again.

"Give him quinine presently," continued the captain. When he departed he was far from satisfied with himself.

A sailor replaced the blanket which had fallen off the sick man, who feebly accepted the attention. His pain was partly assuaged in feeling that he was being protected; he felt that pitiful weakness which even the roughest of mankind feel and which is the outcome of the maternal solicitude of women.

"This chap is certainly in a bad way," avowed the captain to the mate on returning to his cabin. "Have you done anything about replacing him?"

He was told that this matter was already arranged.

"As if I needed a sick man aboard!" he

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went on. "And what ails him beats me."

He put on his spectacles; an operation which generally clarified the skipper's mental outlook. On the table before him he placed the ship's medicine book. What a multitude of names of diseases it contained! He discovered in this nomenclature a bewildering variety of scourges, to any one of which might very justly be ascribed the sufferings of the Dane. Amongst such a list it was hard to make a choice.

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On deck the captain issued orders to shorten sail. The thought that his crew was incomplete, even to the extent of a single man, worried him so that everything and everybody went wrong. Fully a dozen times that morning he called out "Awkward lubbers!" to seamen of tried nimbleness and experience. One man passing close to him he seized by the shoulder and demanded gruffly, "Well,

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you——what about the Dane? How is he?"

"He didn't complain last night, sir. The rest of us could get a wink o' sleep at last."

"Oh! he's getting better," was Captain Wilcox's comment. "Get him up and make him move about on deck. He can breathe fresh air and the morning sun will do him more good than any amount of drugs."

So they went to drag forth the Dane. Supported by a couple of his companions he emerged more dead than alive: all three began pitching about under the burden of his weakness. The captain awaited them. Planted solidly on his legs he emitted a whistle by way of greeting the invalid.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, with affected geniality, "here you are,—yourself once more, eh?"

Before him the invalid, a long, lean young fellow, stood shivering in spite of the hot sun which beat down upon his back, and even the captain could hardly augur anything good of

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a man who could shiver in the bright sun of such a morning.

Nothing revealed itself in the Dane's visage; he hid his feelings as if he wore a mask. The fellow's eyes were as inscrutable as if they were balls of lead.

"Hypocrite!" murmured the Captain to himself. But outwardly he clicked his tongue briskly and continued to express his satisfaction.

"I'm glad to see you're better, my lad," he declared, having a mania, common to masters, for taking wishes for realities.

The young Dane stood before him in silence: it was one of his comrades who announced the terrible truth.

"He says he's blind, sir."

The Dane nodded his head and, as if he were pushing aside a mass of dense oily shadows which hindered his movements, with a disordered gesture of a hand he could no

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longer properly guide he pointed to his staring eyes, which, if he spoke truly, might never more receive the light save in another world.

The captain was shocked. He noted that the unhappy man's face, even while he stood there in pain, trembling from head to foot in the bright blue of a morning sky, whose azure was reflected in the eyes of the sailors and in the Pacific ocean itself, was slowly contorting into a smile.

"Poor devil!" The choking exclamation struggled to the captain's lips.

It was not the utterance itself which surprised those who heard it, but its unwonted tone of sympathy. The captain had expressed in an inflexion all that was really good and benevolent in his make-up: at that his soul had issued from his lips. Often it issues therefrom only with a man's last breath of life.

He laid hold of the Dane's arm. Leaning on it the blind man began to whimper. The

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tears were slow at first in coming, dropping from his eyes like drops of blood from a new-made wound. One of them fell upon the captain's hand, who realized the blessedness of gratitude. No drop of matter was ever more saturated with celestial grace. Moreover, all the bitterness that was in the poor sailor's heart vanished with his tears.

Truly noble spirits find a bitter pleasure in administering consolation. The tears they cause to be shed are the prelude to resignation.

.
There was little need to invoke the sympathy of the crew.

The Dane became endowed forthwith with a Mother, made up of the whole ship's complement. Fifteen loving hearts and thirty arms—what could he want more? It was perhaps a little too much.

These sailors tended their helpless fellow-sailor, washed him, shaved him, dressed him,

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cheered him up, and holding him by his big calloused hand led him forth every day on deck to inhale the invigorating breeze, which was so swiftly fugitive that only the lungs of a man can seize it.

They guided him wherever he wanted to go. Never were there more tender pilots. He, on his part, now knowing nothing further about the visible heaven and earth but what he was told, followed them awkwardly in a sort of stupefaction. He always seemed to dread falling into some imaginary abyss. He had been plunged too suddenly into a terrible darkness.

One morning Dick carefully placed the Dane on a chest upon which he had as usual folded a jacket to render it more comfortable.

Encouraged by some of the crew he proceeded to tell the poor fellow that his blindness, after all, was only temporary.

"Don't lose 'eart, my lad," he said, with a

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wink to his companions, "you'll soon see like the rest of us."

"That's right!" they corroborated in unison.

"My own private opinion is you'll be cured in a fortnight," added Dick.

Of course nobody really believed in this impending cure, but like love, friendship, too, has its falsehoods. More than one of them in secret pictured the despair of the Dane's wife when she came to learn the news. They knew what would happen.

She would fling herself on her husband, embrace him passionately, cling to him, bathed in tears, and scream passionately:

"Oh, what have you all done to my man—where are his beautiful eyes? Brutes that you are, why are *you* not all dead—all of you—rather than fetch him back to me like this?"

Well did these sailors know what women are in their grief, how prone they are to accuse the

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entire human race. How many times on the quays at the return of a ship could they recall similar scenes—women with their arms flung into the air, uttering lamentations and launching the wildest reproaches:

“Ah, why are *you* come back safe and sound, when the man I love is dead? He was a thousand times better than you! Why aren’t *you* all in his place at the bottom of the sea?”

.

The larboard watch had just been summoned when suddenly one of the men set up a cry.

“Jimmy! Oh, my Gawd—poor lad!”

“What about him?” asked the boatswain, startled.

“’E—’e can’t get up?”

“Can’t get up? What’s the matter with him?”

“’E’s got something wrong in ’is ’ead. In ’is ’ead—like—like *’im!*” And with an ac-

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cusing finger he indicated the sightless Dane. The sailors were quick to notice that he shrunk away, as if he fancied the blind man were contagious.

In a flash they realised his meaning: they realised the danger they had all along been running, and became suddenly filled with fear. It was as if a serpent had sprung out of his concealment and was now erect and hissing before them.

For could not the malady which had attacked the Dane now attack them? Perhaps they were already victims. They had never thought of it before. They stood there, huddled together, with trembling limbs, like so many threatened animals.

“Why isn’t Jimmy Lardner at his post?”

It was the captain’s voice, breaking the spell. His face underwent no change when one of the sailors divulged the truth—blurted out something about “the same sickness as the Dane.” Without revealing the horrible

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worry he felt, he echoed the man's words.

"The same sickness! The same sickness! Rubbish! it's simply fear. Pure funk, I tell you; and in any case you needn't all stand there with your hands in your pockets. There's work to do aboard this ship. Step lively!"

The blind man got up from where he lay, remained a moment immovable, and then drew near in the direction of the voices. Not a soul came forward now to take his hand.

A sudden fall on deck checked him; two sailors seeking to escape from him had violently collided. The Dane halted, suspecting some horseplay, then moved forward again. A protruding spar struck his chest and brought him down sharply to his knees.

With a bound a sailor sprang forward to defend the entrance to the forecastle. Still on his knees the unfortunate Dane was taken with a violent fit of coughing. As he coughed a group of sailors, now seized with panic, pro-

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ceeded to dance around him a sort of war-dance. One of them held a broken oar aloft with which he threatened the head of the blind man if he persisted in entering the forecastle, but a feeling of shame made him desist. The mate appeared in the nick of time; he helped the Dane to rise. Giving him his arm, he led him close to the railing, and installed him there, afterwards engaging him in a quiet talk with that total indifference to any possible consequences which was one of the mate's characteristics.

III

HIS hands behind his back, his head sunk on his chest, the captain ceaselessly paced the deck. Kicking aside ropes and objects in his path, he turned and returned like an animal pent in his cage of wood surrounded by water.

Events were overwhelming him. This thing which was happening on board his ship gave him such intolerable inquietude that he felt ready to burst. When he clenched his fists he did it with such violence that his fingernails drew blood.

Plague—THE PLAGUE was on his ship! It had seized upon his men and was blinding them. And, indeed, the situation was sufficiently serious, for the crew was already panic-stricken.

They clamoured to return to port. They

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demanded immediate medical help. Fools! Were they not aware that days and days must elapse before help could possibly come?

All around him the captain's eye encountered only an enormous grey mass, broken into restless billows, with an absolutely empty horizon. Yes; they were in a bad way.

He swept the moisture from his temples with his open palm.

What should he do? That was the question. To continue straight on with a cargo of stricken invalids? Or change his course? Or go back?

His gaze lifted itself above the masts of his ship; it pierced the firmament, as if he were seeking divine counsel.

But no inspiration—no direction came.

When he let his mind dwell on the possibilities of the situation he groaned aloud.

"By God! this is too much—too much!" He had a vision of the whole crew laid low by the mysterious contagion, a shipload of help-

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less blind men; he saw himself, also smitten, no longer able to control his ship; he saw them all stretching out their impotent arms to the mocking deep, their blank sockets confronting an inky firmament. It was an appalling picture.

And it was coming true. The fourth victim lost his sight. Two more men moaned unceasingly in their berths. Even when the waves flung themselves with violence against the sides of the ship their groans rose above the tumult. All felt the presence of an invisible enemy bent on their destruction.

Could the evil be checked? Ought one to take the chance and seek help from the nearest possible quarter? The small circle on the chart which indicated the probable position of the vessel, showed it to be far distant from land—so remote indeed that even with a fair wind, long days, and with little or no wind, weeks and months must elapse before they sighted any land. What could be done?

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The crew was summoned. They listened with ill-concealed impatience to the explanations with which the captain regaled them. Ever and anon, under the mate's orders, a topsman would slowly ascend the shrouds to trim a sail, but once his job was over he rejoined his companions, and resuming his former place in the group, stood there silent, while the captain took the crew into his confidence, deliberated, weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

All at once a half-maddened sailor detached himself from the rest: advanced and began to wave a threatening arm. He took up his stand close to the captain, and actually had the audacity to lay a grimy paw on the latter's shoulder.

"We've had enough, skipper—do you hear? We can't stand any more. You've got to put into a port. You've no right to sacrifice us. If you can't see that—by Christ, you're a fool!"

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At this desperate speech the captain went white. His eyes blazed dangerously.

What might then have happened was averted by the arrival of the mate, who came to consult him about a matter of navigation which required the captain's immediate decision.

As the two conferred together the mutinous sailor stood stock-still. He was crestfallen. He had dared to utter his outrageous speech. Nothing had happened. He cut a curious figure standing there, the rising wind flapping his garments, his eyes already gleaming with fever.

Captain Wilcox felt that the moment had come when he must assert his full authority. He had uttered the familiar words, "I command this ship," but the rest died in his throat. After one or two inarticulate attempts, he said, "Very well, my lads, we will try for help—for a doctor. We'll turn the ship completely

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out of its course. Fear's got hold of you—nothing but fear. . . .”

.

The question was—could he still command the necessary man-power to carry out such an intention? It was hard to say. He saw the hands mount the rigging. He saw the steersman half-doubled up in an effort exceeding his strength. The *Sea-Shine*, put hard-a-port, began describing the arc of a circle in the leaping water. The huge waves lashed themselves into convulsions like so many infuriated wild animals. For one moment it seemed to the captain to be the end of all things. He reeled and might have fallen if the mate had not sprung forward and given him a hand. Then he pulled himself together, planted his feet firmly on the deck, and was himself again.

Towards him came a solitary shrinking figure, faltering out excuses. It was the mu-

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tinous sailor. The captain did not deign to answer, but dismissed the man with a gesture.

To quell his agitation he paced the deck for hours, but the fatigue he endured did not make him less sensitive to the misery of the situation.

The wind fell; then followed rain; afterwards the skies cleared and the stars emerged in their full brightness. The Southern Cross shone, large and resplendent as a flower. It pointed the path, and the vessel, heel-down, fairly flew over the foam.

Wilcox told himself that he commanded a ship which had deserted. No wave had damaged hull or rudder; all was sound and the barometer marked fair. He smote his chest in anger. Yes, he saw it now; he had acted hastily, he had yielded too readily to a cowardly prudence. Duty often involves the taking of risks. Marine adventure is a game which must be played out to the end. He should have held firm, when the crew threat-

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ened his course was plain. He should have met them with a bold front, with a loaded pistol in his hand. He should have clapped the ringleaders in irons. He clenched his fists, and then with one smote his open palm. Was it now too late?

When the mate came to relieve him he had hard work to make him quit his post.

IV

DAILY the epidemic increased. The victims, burning with fever, shook their fists at the sky; they staggered about the deck; their teeth chattered with the crisp crackling noise which tinder makes in the flames.

The bulk of the vessel was doubled; they had crowded on all her sails. She reeled under the force of the wind, alternately pitching and lurching.

Her movements were so instinct with life that she suggested some active, breathing, leaping animal; the sailors encouraged her wild race by their cries and gestures.

The captain had aged suddenly, as if the essence of Time had escaped from his overcharged heart. Instinctively this morning he had looked up. To his eyes the clear and

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lovely countenance of the sky, in its feminine softness, concealed the very refinements of fatality. He inhaled, he felt something malefic in the air. His eye followed fearfully a too-long-suspended wave, a melting cloud, an increasing ray of the sun. After thus meditating for some time the captain again stood up. All hope had fled from his bosom. He had become involved in a game in which chances were dead against him. Striding over to the man at the helm he issued in a loud voice a surprising word of command. Immediately the sails veered to port and the vessel rolled over on her side. The mate hurried aft, astonishment depicted on his face. The crew saw him apparently expostulating in low tones with his chief.

The next thing that happened was that the ship's canvas hung limp against the masts. The wind had changed and eluded the captain's efforts. Now and again sudden gusts came, but they were of brief duration. The

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sails did not fill, but writhed, snake-like, as if animated by hidden internal mechanism, and refused to be controlled by the sailors. After several painful gasps the wind expired at last in a mighty sigh. The *Sea-Shine* slackened her course, a tremor passed through her timbers from stern to stern; she became all but motionless; no longer did the mark of her keel show upon the expanse of waters.

Orders were given to furl the sails which the rolling of the vessel would have damaged.

So empty of life was the sky that the crew experienced the gloomiest forebodings. A chance cable falling over the side created an uncanny reverberation. The least noise set up a weird echo. Human speech became so magnified that the crew instinctively fell silent. It almost seemed to them as if their most secret thoughts took form in the silence and fled from them upward into space.

Alone of them all the cook appeared un-

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troubled—nothing of what was happening to the ship had any concern for him. His business had nothing to do with navigation. In the reflections which he addressed to the fire in his galley he made it abundantly clear that nothing that could happen to anybody or anything on board was to him of the least consequence.

One of the cook's diversions nearly drove the crew crazy. He attached a rope to an iron bucket which he let down over the side, and proceeded to make such a prolonged infernal racket that every man's teeth were set on edge. When expostulated with for this, he loudly demanded to know if it wasn't his right to draw up sea-water? The ocean belonged to everybody, didn't it? Who dared interfere with his rights? If it made a bit of a noise, was that his fault?

The next day the cook deemed the moment propitious to slit the throat of the pig, whose

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squeals and uproar further goaded the crew to madness.

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Still the dead calm persisted.

The ship made not the least headway. It lay like a log of dead timber on the surface of the water. Vainly it hoisted its sails in the hopes of catching a passing whiff of air. The helpless *Sea-Shine* was in the grip of some vast, invisible, inert force.

The men who had at first suffered from lassitude were now physically restored by the enforced rest, and began to grow impatient. They recognised more than ever the danger of the present situation. They longed more than ever to fly, to escape from their poisoned prison-house; but the wind which alone could bring about their release came not.

In the evening those who still were free from malady foregathered to talk, and their bitter complaints and criticisms duly fell on the ears

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of the captain, who incessantly moved up and down his ship studying the sea and the heavens.

In the evenings those who were still unstricken were ready to clutch at any fragment of hope, however vain and desperate. One man suggested making long oars and rowing the vessel; another getting out the lifeboats and towing her; another explained his invention of a mechanism which would be their salvation. Their very despair rendered all credulous. When their voices dropped and they spoke in whispers, the captain well knew that these men were reproaching him for his inaction.

But what could he do?

He shrugged his shoulders and continued to pace the deck. One can always come to terms with men. It was the sky which baffled him—a vast sky from which nothing fell, and in which floated never the tiniest cloud.

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The boatswain wiped his moustache before speaking. He was painfully embarrassed. By an odd caprice of character he was always courting the company of the captain, whom he feared; but no sooner was in his presence than he was ill at ease. Now he felt a sinking at the stomach, and was tempted to take flight with his mission unfulfilled.

"If I speak to you, sir, about this matter," he began awkwardly, "it is because of the crew. It's 'Go and tell the Captain' with them from morning to night. I'm sick of it. The fact is, sir, they want you to shut up all the blind hands. They ask for them to be put in quarantine, and (I'm only repeating their very words) there are some who actually want them thrown overboard. Thrown overboard! It ain't human!"

Leaning on his elbows the captain regarded his visitor with an expression of infinite curiosity, mingled with contempt. When the boatswain had ceased speaking he scratched

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his head thoughtfully. The mate, seated on the edge of the table, rustled a chart which he held extended in his fingers. The next moment, both the captain and the mate were deep in a calculation of latitude and longitude.

The boatswain was at his wits' end.

"I know," he recommenced desperately, "that such conduct ain't human, but there are times when men are like that. And the crew ain't responsible in their present state. The very moment they see the blind ones coming they make a bolt up the rigging as high as they can get, and hang on there until the coast is clear. It's no use my calling out orders to them. They simply don't obey me."

He clapped a hand to his forehead. "They've got the idea in the fore-castle that the blindness is contagious, and I can't control them any more."

The boatswain emitted a groan. He felt his errand had been useless. He regretted he had come.

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"Well, sir, I've told you, and you can do as you like."

"Certainly," replied the captain.

"And after all, what good will this here precaution do?" added the boatswain, with a tired air.

"It won't help to give you sense, boatswain, for one thing," rejoined the captain quickly; "but," he added, "we must do anything we can in reason to ward off the germs. Where do you propose to put them—the sick ones?"

"In the hold," suggested the mate.

"Then it must be got ready." Turning to the boatswain the captain said, "You go and burn sulphur all over the ship; and as for your men, instead of listening to their yarns, make 'em obey your orders. They will sleep on deck. Do you understand? And send the carpenter in here."

The boatswain was only too glad to make his escape. He had just turned on his heel when the captain stopped him.

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"You understand, boatswain, that you will help us to put the blind ones into the hold."

Never in his life had it occurred to the mind of the boatswain to resist the wishes of his superior officer, and particularly such a one as Captain Wilcox. Yet he quailed before the risks implicit in this command. With his hand on the door he signified by his bent head and look of patient resignation that he was a condemned man.

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When they became aware of the captain's intentions the blind men protested violently. One and all still hoped to be cured of their blindness. They believed that the action of the wind and sun would exert a beneficial effect and kill the microbes which were attacking their sight. At such moments as they were freed from fear they surrendered to the most extravagant hopes; their *naïveté* suggested all sorts of remedies: one in particular

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compounded of tar and seaweed they credited with powerful virtues. They were for ever bathing their eyes in sea-water. After they had bathed them they exposed them to the rays of the sun. They fondly imagined that limitless space is endowed with some special virtue for human sight, and that the vision of a man, like that of the birds, should properly roam over vast distances.

As the mate appeared powerless to deal with these blind recalcitrants, the captain himself took a hand. He laid hold of the first man by the shoulders and hair, and despite his struggles and cries flung him with some violence down the open hatchway, into the hold, where he fell amongst the sacks of cargo.

The mate and the boatswain did not fail to profit by this vigorous example.

"What a job!" grumbled the latter, gripping another unfortunate, who bawled loudly for help, lifting him up and dropping him bodily

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down the hatchway with a cry, "Look out there below!"

"What a job!" he repeated to the mate, in the act of laying hold of a new victim.

Such decisive action quickly rendered the blind men docile. They became cowed. The captain again became an object of their wholesome respect. They even reached forth to shake his hand as they descended the ladder, as of men going to their death, imploring him to look after their wives and children in port. The boatswain was so overcome by these speeches that his eyes filled with tears. In the hold below, the mate, charged with receiving the men, found himself surrounded and jostled, with a dozen hands fluttering about his face like the convulsive movement of night-birds. In a sort of panic these unfortunate creatures twisted and turned about him, even tripping up at his feet, catching at his garments, emitting groans and curses. Never

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had he in his life endured such an experience, save once when a boat he was on went down. He recalled that then the passengers, in a panic, abandoned themselves to the same wild motions, a sort of dance, probably characteristic of collective despair. "Exactly the same rhythm!" thought the mate grimly. These bewildered wretches besought him to set them free. One of them, clutching his legs, he struggled vainly to shake off.

"For God's sake! Don't mind about the others. See the Captain, for God's sake. He will let *me* go. Ask him for me—only *me*!"

The mate felt pity, not contempt. He knew that at such a time of stress a man is always asking only for himself—wants to save his own skin. In the egoism of the flesh and the vanity of the spirit he craves the exclusive pity of God, who has created the world and peopled it with millions upon millions such as he.

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Just above, lying flat on his chest, the captain stared down at the scene through the darkened hatchway. He shouted down loudly to the mate:

"Tell those maniacs if they don't hold their row they will have to deal with me!"

His tones instantly inspired fear. They, who had nothing further to dread in this life, trembled and obeyed. What subtle motives guided these beings? Whatever they were, they ceased their struggling and became silent.

Perhaps it is all a kind of enchantment; if so, to manage men is to have a wizard's power.

The mate lost no time in ascending the ladder. The hatches were promptly battened down to prevent escape, and the boatswain quitted the scene: he wished to shut out any further sounds from this sealed coffin, the thought of which tormented his soul.

"Poor beggars!" said the mate. The cap-

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tain did not reply. Only his eyes gleamed more darkly, like little inky clouds before the sun.

"I s'pose you're not going to let 'em die of hunger, are you, Captain Wilcox?"

It was the querulous voice of the cook, who felt that it was high time for him to intervene with a protest. "And how are you goin' to pass food to 'em. I should like you to tell me that?"

Holding his apron up to his face he half hid a sneer, being confident that what he had suggested had been overlooked and would cause the captain embarrassment.

"We have thought of all that, you miserable little viper!" answered Wilcox testily, mastering an impulse to cuff the fellow.

The cook, always sensitive, paled under the insult. He would have liked to have answered back. But the captain, besides being the ruler of the ship, was so tall, so big, so powerful, and so angry, that he dared not provoke

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him further. Nevertheless, hatred filled his heart.

On deck, the other mariners at last felt security. The love of life fills the heart with a vain trustfulness. No longer confronted by its effects they imagined the evil itself had departed.

For two whole days ensuing there were no more misadventures. Little by little the men resumed their old serenity, as a victim of cold warms himself before a fire. A sensation of content permeated their bodies, and revealed itself in their cheeks. Their lips became redder. They felt their muscles and promised themselves to put vigour into the job when the time came to crowd on sail. Then, on the third day a man tripped and fell. He had not dared to acknowledge his condition, and now lay there with clenched teeth, holding his very breath and resisting the temptation to cry out. But his agony betrayed his will, and it was not long before he set up a long, piercing scream—

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the scream of a woman in the pangs of childbirth.

His companions started up, seeking to escape, crushing their ribs against the ship's railing in their efforts to avoid the new victim's wild movements. In their ears sounded anew all the former tragedy of a man in agony struggling in the throes of a relentless fate.

The mate appeared, took the fresh victim in his arms and carried him to the fatal hatchway. He disappeared.

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So slowly passed the days that the sailors conceived their lives to be longer than the lives of all other mortals. The sky was unchanged. Nothing betokened any approaching change in the weather.

Then upon their ears fell the noise of a mysterious commotion. It was the blind men, their imprisoned comrades, raining blows on the hatchway and demanding their liberty.

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They protested against the damnable treason which had immured them. The men on deck did not stir; they listened, trembling, to the mingled sound of the blows and human voices, which to them had something supernatural in it: it was like listening to the cry of their own consciences. It kept them awake throughout whole nights, while the great stars shone, wide-apart and never filling the heavens as in other latitudes. The sky took on a queer, indefinite quality; it was so transparent that, straining their eyes, they fancied they could catch a glimpse of the Gates of Paradise, which we are told in the Scriptures are of polished jade.

V

THOUGHTFULLY and with measured steps the captain was observed moving along the deck. He was talking to himself, and the mate overheard him mutter, "Four paces on the left from this spot to my cabin."

He was then standing by the main-mast. He took four equal steps, and then halted before the companion-way. For several days past it had not escaped the mate's attention that his chief had moved about circumspectly, taking note of objects and passing his fingers over their surface. The mate watched these movements, and himself imitated them.

"It's a wise precaution," his chief assured him.

They descended together. Taking some tobacco from a pouch hung up in the cabin, the captain slowly lit his pipe. His knees trem-

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bled a little as he sat down. The two men remained close to one another for some time in melancholy silence.

In the midst of the clouds of smoke a sigh escaped from the captain's lips. The mate raised his eyes and observed the tanned forehead and cheeks of his chief wet with perspiration. Once or twice he seemed about to speak, but seemed loath to utter his thoughts.

At last he murmured, "If one jumped overboard, it would put an end to it."

The sentiment accorded with what was passing in the mate's mind. In imagination he felt the warm flood receiving his limbs, the voluptuous abandonment of himself to oblivion, the gradually waning of consciousness and the end of mortal suffering. He was interrupted by the captain, who, still puffing at his pipe, resumed,

"But we haven't the right."

The mate understood that his conscience refused an oblivion which would free them

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from all their present cares. A death which is easier than life is a desertion. Every man owes a duty to his fellows. It might be necessary to die and to die miserably, but let there be no voluntary shirking of responsibilities!

The captain continued to smoke. And although they shared thoughts amounting to the most intimate confidences the two men had no need to utter them: they maintained a resolute silence lest their emotions should betray them. . . .

A knock came at the door and the boatswain staggered in. He flung himself down on a sack and smiting his knees with his fist, burst forth despairingly,

“Another one!”

“Another one! Who?”

“The Irishman.”

The boatswain went on, in a dazed way,

“It will be our turn next—our turn—the turn of all of us. We will be stuck here in the middle of the sea—all blind—all lost!”

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"Yes; I believe that," said the captain calmly.

And what will we do then?"

"Ah—that I don't know," was the response. "We will think about it."

The mate nodded his head in obvious agreement. The captain arose and fetched out some quinine and a little brandy.

The boatswain reached out his hand to take both, like a beggar receiving alms.

"Give the Irishman this to take," said the captain.

When the boatswain had gone he began examining the cabin with the most particular attention. His movements were deliberate and careful. On a shelf his eye fell on his revolver; this he took down and laid on the table.

"Now, Brand, with that we could make short work of this business," he remarked.

Both men gazed at the small weapon; both felt a strange longing for death. Their

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thoughts soon took so morbid a turn that the captain, to dispel their mood, again resorted to speech.

"What do you think the chances are of a steamer crossing this latitude?"

Before replying the mate went over the chart on the table; he studied it for some minutes, and then heaved a sigh.

"I should say it would be a miracle."

His chief nodded assent.

"A doctor—that's what we need most."

"Yes—a doctor."

"We ought to have isolated the patients from the first."

"But where? The ship's small."

"True, the ship's small. But she's none the worse for that," declared the captain, ever ready to defend his vessel.

"Yes, she's a good ship."

"A very good ship."

There was a brief pause; then he went on,

"Have you ever heard tell of a ship in such

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a fix as ours—rotting away helplessly in mid-ocean?”

“Never.”

“No more have I, and I am getting on now in years and have plied between most ports of the world.”

“But I’ve heard about ships full of dying men—struck down by yellow fever.”

“So have I; but the men were dead or dying. Here you have a crew of men as able-bodied as yourself—but blind. I’ve never heard of an epidemic like this, have you?”

“Never.”

“At the same time, one doesn’t know everything.”

“No, that’s so.”

“What we badly need, Brand, is a doctor. He would tell us straight off what ought to be done. It’s our damned helplessness which is killing us, and the ship. We must stand about with folded arms, like idiots, while the plague just picks us off. Never have I seen at

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sea a thing of this sort, where one must let germs work their own sweet will without interference. No: never to my knowledge was a captain in such a fix as this. . . . I don't profess to have made a scientific study of the human body—that's a doctor's business. So, I ask you, what can I do to prevent what is happening? What will the owners say if they ever recover the hull? Take that revolver off the table—take it up quick, or . . ."

Tranquilly the mate arose, laid a steady hand on the weapon and returned it to the shelf, where the captain had ranged the photographs of his family.

His quiet action did not reveal what was really passing in his soul, for he had felt a delirious impulse to clap the revolver to his temples and press the trigger. But his movements now were cool and mechanical. He had really been dangerously close to death, and his lips curved in a disdainful smile as he sat down again.

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"What bothers me is—where does the disease come from?"

Captain Wilcox was not addressing the mate, but some being in the abstract. After repeating this question he became lost in thought. He removed his spectacles, breathed on the lenses, wiped them and, still with a far-away look in his eyes, said:

"What are we to make of it all? This malady is invisible. The light goes out suddenly without reason. It is just this which demoralises the crew, which makes their teeth chatter as if there were ghosts about the ship. Naturally, it all strikes them as supernatural. Haven't you noticed that?"

Such dense clouds of tobacco smoke poured from the captain's lips as to hide the visage of his companion; when the smoke floated away he was struck by the utter absence of any expression there. He himself did not acknowledge all that was on his mind. He saw himself the commander of a ship whose entire

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crew had gone blind: it was this thought that hung about his heart like lead.

"Do you think they are all suffering from the same disease?" he asked, after a pause.

"Well, sir, they all have the same symptoms."

"Just so. Pain in the head, burning at the eyes. A sort of drill which pierces their forehead at the top of the nose, and everything swims before them, eh—up to the moment when it all goes black, totally black?"

"Yes, totally. They all say that."

"Two or three days before they hear a funny buzzing in their ears?"

"Not more than three days before. It begins that way."

"Not more than three days? Ah!"

At that instant the captain was reckoning the hours since the buzzing had first begun to torment him. He drew a deep breath and remained so long silent, leaning his elbows on the table, that he seemed to doze.

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The time passed.

Suddenly the captain made a movement of impatience, holding his hand tightly to his eyes. Then, with lips which trembled a little, he asked.

"Is it evening now?"

"I believe so, sir."

The light from without had already faded into dusk. They lifted their gaze. The unlit copper lamp above their heads swung to and fro, ticking like a pendulum.

The captain once again passed his hand over his eyes, as if to dispel the mists which gathered before them, and regarded wistfully the unlit lamp whose burnished bowl shone in the waning light like a fat oscillating ball of mercury. Both men remained thus, apparently absorbed in reflections upon their destiny and the impending darkness.

Then, still in silence, their fingers reached out, and they began feeling the surface of the table and the backs of their chairs. It was as

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if they were already conning the first melancholy lessons of the blind.

All at once from without a formidable voice with an Irish accent broke the silence which had enveloped the ship. They hurried on deck to behold a huge sailor, his mighty fist uplifted, launching curses at the sky: curses so black that the Holy Virgin must have shed tears to hear them.

The captain came to an instant decision.

"Release those blind men," he said. "Shutting them up is useless. Let 'em have air. Do you hear, Mr. Brand?"

"Yes, sir," replied the mate, and he went forward to execute the order.

VI

HE resisted to the last, squaring his broad shoulders against the oncoming evil, stamping violently on the deck and protesting,

“Never! I’ll never give in!”

But the torture seized him all the same. The flesh about his temples burnt as if held to the flames. He bore the pain stoically for a long time.

He passed two whole days, moving in the shadows, stumbling about and bruising his limbs, abusing those who sought to help him, refusing to recognise the curse that had already descended upon his head. As he climbed the ladders, or strode to and fro upon the deck with lowered head, he grumbled incessantly, but never did he appear to hesitate. No; he would resist to the last.

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Twilight had come on the second day when the captain of the *Sea-Shine* summoned the mate, drew him towards him, and stared him full in the face.

At that dread instant, of the two men it was the mate alone who saw. In vain the captain with his grasp on the mate's shoulders opened and closed his eyelids and strained his facial muscles.

"It's all over," he said.

He relinquished his grasp. The mate involuntarily rubbed his arm. The blind man groped for a chair, found it and seated himself. Although he breathed heavily and put his fists to his throbbing temples, not a whimper escaped him. With his back to the door the mate waited and observed the plight of his chief: he knew well his own turn would come next. At length, Wilcox straightened himself up and faced his subordinate, who noted a new look of dignity and resignation in his face.

"My friend," said the captain in a firm

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voice, "I yield to you. To you I pass over the command of this ship."

The mate took a step forward and seized the captain's hand.

"I will do my very best, sir."

After a pause, he added,

"I will take over the command, but I'm afraid it won't be for long."

He uttered this speech with a light laugh. The elder man admired his courage.

"Listen to me, Brand. I have drawn up a long-winded report of everything to the owners. This document is in my locker. It will give those gentlemen something to read and amuse themselves with. You know the sort they are: how they want to know everything that goes on aboard the ship, from the time she leaves port until she puts in again. One of them, a young fellow, has often said to me,

"Tell us everything, Captain. Give us a complete account of your voyage. I expect

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you had a lively time. Wicked storms, eh? Nearly foundered in a gale? Well, don't keep it all to yourself—let's have the whole story. If I had time, I'd take to the sea myself.' 'That's it!' the eldest partner would say. 'But we haven't the time to go cruising. We're obliged to stick to dull office-work. But we like to hear about the voyages of our ships, all the same.' God knows what ideas these owners have got about me; but I ask you, Brand, as an old ship's commander yourself, have you ever had a harder job than writing up a special log? However, I've made my report as long as possible, and turn the rest over to you from date."

The mate did not reply. He appeared to be expecting another and more intimate message.

"No," said the other, as if divining his thoughts, "I haven't had time to write to my wife, and that's a fact. You see, the owners are sure to want so many explanations. . . ."

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With the mate's aid he sought the deck, where he wandered about aimlessly all that day.

His hands were outstretched before him, and he tripped over the obstacles in his path. It was with manifest inquietude that he listened to his successor's orders. As time passed he grew irritable, so that when the mate passed near him he bade him stop, and informed him coldly that he felt it necessary to offer him a word or two of advice. He made it clear that he disagreed with the mate's orders; the management of the ship was in his opinion quite unsatisfactory; and after some further colloquies of this sort, Captain Wilcox resumed the command he had abdicated.

.

After his latest interview with the captain the mate repaired to the cook's galley, to explain to the cook how he ought to practise his sense of touch in case "the thing" came also to him.

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The cook replied to this suggestion tartly. His continued immunity only served to increase his habitual pride.

He therefore informed the mate that as for him, he had no intention of going blind like the others. He "wasn't used to catching diseases and ailments"; his father and mother were—thank God—hale and hearty. He added that it was the very first time in his life that he had served under the orders of a blind captain and a sightless crew, on a ship which never so much as budged in the water; and that it was enough to disgust a decent man like himself to have to feed a rotten crowd whose disgraceful behaviour ashore was probably responsible for their infection.

This speech might have received condign punishment, but the cook forestalled the mate's indignation by adopting his suggested practice on the spot. He closed his eyes tight, groped about for and found a piece of bacon

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on a distant shelf, and a handful of rice in a sack. These he laid on the table, and still with his eyes shut proceeded to manipulate them for the pot.

In this operation he showed so much expertness as to satisfy the mate that, eyes or no eyes, the cook knew what he was about. "Right!" he said laconically, and quitted the galley.

Doubtless some of the cook's muttered comments relating to himself came to the mate's ears, to the effect that "certain people had no red blood in their veins, and were ready to swallow any insults." But he only smiled grimly. Perhaps he disdained the crazy babblings of this miserable creature: he was himself a man who had seen too much of humanity not to be indulgent to the frailties of others, even such a one as the cook.

When the mate had gone, the cook sank down upon a sack of potatoes and grasped his head between his hands, a grotesque picture of

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despair. He was in great pain, and his eyes burned as if an enemy had thrown vitriol in his flushed face.

.

One evening, after busying himself with the log, the mate settled himself near the captain, his elbows on the table. He coolly considered his own present condition. He was already experiencing a physical agony which lacerated his flesh and rent his nerves.

"It's like a surgeon cutting down to the bone. I can feel the sharp steel at work. The question is, how long can I stand this without yelling?"

His teeth closed on his fingers, drawing blood. Nevertheless he muttered to himself, "Grin and bear it, old son. Be a man! The captain could stand it without making much of a fuss. Of course he had a different temperament, not so highly wrought. He has had a knock-out blow, but he keeps calm. Yet

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my nerves are not like——! I can't go on like this in silence much longer. I feel the knife slicing into my brain—the blade is—but I have not, I will not complain."

The captain got to his feet, took but a single step and straightway fell on the table: sometimes he forgot his blindness. But once upright the futility of his efforts recurred to him. He resumed his seat with an expression of resignation on his features.

All at once the mate said aloud, "It certainly is painful."

The remark revealed to the captain what was happening.

"Poor fellow!" he murmured sympathetically.

"Thanks. I think I'll lie down a bit if you can spare me, sir. Everything is arranged."

"Everything?"

Physical ailment must not weigh with a chief who has his professional responsibilities to consider. There are times when he must in-

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interrupt the last words of a dying man if the orders he has given him have been overlooked.

At such times a man must not speak of his mother or of his God. It only matters that he fulfils his duty.

"Everything that—that we spoke about."

"Turn in, then."

With bent head Wilcox tried to re-kindle his pipe, which no longer had any savour, without burning himself. The mate undressed himself slowly. He folded his garments carefully in order to find them again easily.

Human beings who dwell together have mysterious understandings, and their silence holds few secrets.

"Did you speak, Brand?" asked the captain suddenly.

To this question the mate answered with what was uppermost in his thoughts.

"A queer disease—very, very queer," he murmured, getting into his bunk.

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It creaked with his weight. He lay at full length, to await with all the calm he could muster the oncoming of eternal darkness.

When his pipe went out again Wilcox grew restless.

"I must go up and have a look around," he said.

He quitted the cabin.

.
Late that night the mate made the observation,

"It is extraordinary how everything seems out of place—all upside down and askew. It's a wonder how one goes on being human, after a terrific upset like this. It's an altogether new interpretation of life that strikes one's intelligence, don't you think?"

The captain, thus addressed, answered shortly:

"I think it's no good talking unless you have something to say. I don't believe any captain afloat ever had such a responsibility as I've got.

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Here's a blind ship on my hands—a helpless ship to bring back to port somehow."

A smile played about the mate's lips and he thought: "Yes, I can smile, even yet. I can still see the funny side of things. That's the kind of man I am. There's no use making a song about it. I've been through too much at sea to waste time in lamentation. What is the past, after all? A wrinkled old woman—not worth looking at twice. . . . What is curious about us is that while we and the things about us are changed, inside us we haven't changed at all. The captain is at bottom just the same. What has happened to us isn't the end—we still go on being men. . . . It's a pity! . . .

"Why is it a pity?" After a pause he pursued his train of thought. "The skipper has good sound qualities which are a tower of strength. And then take myself—— Oh, my God, I'm done in! Where is the table—where is it? And when I have found it, what——"

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"You get on my nerves, Brand," cried the captain unexpectedly, "barging about, without knowing where you're going, and without telling me what you're up to. You get on my nerves, I tell you."

VII

OF the whole crew there was now only a single one left who was not blind; only one who could move about freely on deck.

He alone was able to discern, under a distant cloud, a bird flying on the horizon. The man was Dick. Him they wore out with all their demands upon him. He even busied himself in the galley helping the quarrelsome cook, who had succumbed like the rest. How many times a day, at the captain's orders, had Dick climbed aloft to observe if the sky had changed, if there was not a break visible anywhere through which the long-wished-for breeze might come! But no; the sky remained unchanged, unflecked by a single speck of vapour.

Dick was the eyes of the ship. He alone

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possessed knowledge of space; he alone could count the stars at night. The muscular energy of the crew was wholly at Dick's service. They were filled with a terrible anxiety lest those fragile organs—his eyes—fragile as a flame in the wind—might even now be carrying a fatal germ which would extinguish them for ever.

He still moved about with a gait elastic and free. He could *see*! For this young man—whose body was still fresh and unsullied—the Almighty had reserved the blessed gift of light.

.

From the far distant horizon there sounded a sudden peal of thunder. It reverberated through the sky. It caused the surface of the sea to undulate. A wind arose, it whirled in mid-air and then descended with a rush. It swept over the vast stretch of ocean. Then ensued a commotion of all elements, the rum-

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blings and flashings of an approaching tempest. Waves sprang up, swelling to a great height, and the *Sea-Shine* forthwith began to rock in the trough of the sea.

The wind promptly attacked the listless sails, and they sprang into life.

Likewise, in its outward rush it bore towards the horizon the cries of exultation which arose from the lips of the crew—cries louder and fiercer even than those “hurrahs” of seamen in war-time, who with faces blackened with powder pass in review before an admiral’s flag-ship in the hour of victory. This clamour issued from the very depths of their being—out of their instinct for life; it was as inarticulate as the cry of a new-born babe.

.

The ship’s timbers creaked under the force of the gale, as if they had been newly-wrought. Her masts swayed and trembled like trees in the forest. With all her sails un-

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furled the *Sea-Shine* headed once more for land and salvation.

For nearly a week Dick thereafter got no chance to sleep. His duties multiplied unceasingly. As he carried all their hopes, the crew implored him to remain on duty. Above all, they urged him to keep a constant lookout for a passing ship which could save them.

In the vigour of his youth he toiled for them valiantly. He hardly asked help even in trimming the sails. With a light heart he had called his companions, put the proper rope in the hands of each, and gave them the signal to pull. They entered ardently into their job, put their full strength into it and rejoiced when they heard his high-pitched laugh, which rang out sharply aloft like the crack of a whip.

Often he found at his side a good-looking young sailor, who remained a moment making queer gestures, but who departed without speaking.

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At last, however, the man, not without fetching a deep sigh, explained what was in his mind.

"It's this here beard which troubles me," he said, pointing to his chin. "What'll my missus say when she sees me? Couldn't you trim it, mate?"

With a laugh and a tap on his comrade's shoulder, Dick agreed. A few vigorous strokes with the scissors through the hairy thicket, and the sailor's chin was again laid bare.

.
The days dragged their heavy length along. Dick had sighted nothing on the horizon but the traces of storm. He began literally to wear out, and begged to be allowed to sleep. But his ship-mates, dreading the chance of a ship crossing the sky-line while their watcher slept, pleaded with him to continue his look-out upon a sea which their imagination endowed with fleets of flying steamers. So Dick

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was forced out of his bunk and stood for hours shivering against a mast to survey the vast and empty waste of waters. Fatigue began to devastate his young strength, as a tree is deflowered of its blossoms and withered in a gale.

All day his ship-mates crawled at his feet with their perpetual question:

"What d'ye see now, Dick? Don't you see anything yet, Dick? We thought we heard just now . . ."

His features coated with grime, his lips crackling with dust which tasted bitter on his tongue, he was well-nigh maddened by their voices—too loud for his shattered nerves. Often he refused to answer, remaining silent in a kind of lucid stupor which was almost, but not quite, sleep.

Throughout that stupor his comrades persisted in shouting at him. When he did not respond, and his tightly-shut lips frightened them, they shook him roughly, their hands

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fumbling about his mouth to learn the secret of his obstinate silence.

"They think I'm dead," he thought. Their consternation finally vanquished his anger. He resigned himself, swearing softly, and once more regained his post, straining his eyes into space where nothing dwelt but the invisible spirit of the wind.

Life grew fantastic—a life in which there was no sleep. He became a prey of hallucinations. He seemed to be in the midst of a horrible dream from which he could not escape. He grew to hate all those about him. Tears welled up in his eyes and he struck viciously at the mast against which he had so long bruised his shoulders. He cried out to the group about him, blind witnesses of his sufferings, that he had finished—that he was "off into the hold to sleep, and never wake up again." He was "done in" at last, he said.

"But what if a ship passes?" they cried out in tragic anguish.

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"I don't care," he answered; "I'm going to sleep."

They tried to reason with him. Could he blame them for their anxiety?

"Look at us," they wailed. "Since you can see, look at us! Ain't we your old pals? Have you the heart, man, to leave us in the lurch? What we are asking of you is only right and fair. You can't refuse us."

They clung pitifully to all that remained to them of hope.

Several of the poor devils screamed out their supplications in tones so piercing as to set Dick's teeth on edge.

He saw their torments, saw the terror depicted on the dirty visages of these creatures who passed whole days in crawling about the ship. But he had ceased to pity them. He felt a bitter grudge against them all. In his rancour he turned on them callously, and told them that they must seek elsewhere for their salvation—as for him, it would be far better

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to be dead than to go on living this sort of dog's life.

"You only think of your bloody selves," he shouted, with his fist upraised. "That's all you think of—your bloody selves."

To them his attitude was incomprehensible—monstrous—inhuman. He alone could *see*—should he not for their sake, for the sake of the ship, for his own sake, remain continually on the look-out, serve as a perpetual beacon of distress at the mast-head? Would not they themselves have done the like for days and nights without sleep or complaint or anger when they could see?

For hours the deck re-echoed with their pleadings and expostulations.

He found them mean-spirited, and their present conduct drove him into a fit of nervous anger. In his fury he launched out with his fists and struck them. They made no attempt to return his blows, warding them off awkwardly, cravenly, hoping that when his

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rage was over he would consent to resume his duties as look-out. Dick finally spent himself pummeling their heads and faces. When he paused for breath, these unhappy beings grovelled again at his feet; they wiped their bleeding mouths and, in the same tone as before, renewed their wild entreaties to him to be reasonable, not to abandon his post, to use his eyes in order that they might be saved from destruction and death. Utterly vanquished, Dick slid down on to the deck, his hands tearing at his hair, crying out that they would all drive him mad.

“Hard luck, eh, Dick, my lad?”

It was the voice of the captain. Not even his authority had been able to obtain a respite for the poor sailor. Always the blind men protested to him that a steamer might be sighted any moment. Some declared that they felt its proximity: and over these presentiments the Russian grew especially vociferous.

“Suppose it steams in sight and Dick is

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asleep—where are we all? He hasn't the right to sacrifice our only chance. No, sir, he hasn't the right!"

The captain now lifted up Dick, as he lay in a sort of stupor. He urged him to stick it out for one day more at the mast-head, and that during this time he would himself ensure the repose he so badly needed.

The master's tranquil words soothed the exhausted man, as the sound of a lullaby from the lips of his mother had soothed him in infancy. He even, like a tired child, let his hand rest for a moment in the captain's. Then, collecting all his strength, he climbed resolutely to the mast-head. He resumed his contemplation of the sea, which appeared to grow jet-black under his fixed scrutiny. It was only when a school of flying-fish spangled the air with their gleaming forms that the water reappeared blue to his eyes and resumed its gradations of shadow.

The whole morning he kept to his post, the

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captain by his side, the curling clouds from the latter's pipe occasionally touching the hair of the young sailor, now as flowing as the tresses of a girl. Every time that his senses reeled, the elder's hand touched his own. This caused him to start and sweep the horizon with his glance, often humid from the tears which sprang from his inflamed eyelids. These tears produced for him the curious optical illusion of a distant rainbow.

But never once did his intense gaze perceive, amidst all that lay outside the ship wrought by God, any solitary example of the work of man.

Night fell.

An enormous moon formed a solid circle of light, projecting but a single ray, so that the metallic water was traversed by a vast luminous bar.

One by one the lights of heaven were extinguished like the lights in the cottage windows of a fishing village at the curfew hour.

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It was a night that had been balm to the eyes if one had not been so utterly weary. It was deliciously warm. Dick continued to watch. With nerves tense he sensed thousands of living things surging about him. . . . In the silence, a continual process of integration and disintegration was going on: a fermentation of elements. Imperceptible germs suspended in the ocean burst their coverings, and becoming free took flight, seeking warmer trade-routes—those frequented by the great merchant ships. Again, in the midst of all this, downy particles were precipitated, and eddying downwards to the aqueous depths, were impearled there.

Likewise, there was in his ears the incessant hushed tumult of millions of darting, consuming things, like insects of prey.

Sometimes, at the sides of the ship a bunch of seaweed, instinct with life, like a sensitive plant, reached out its tentacles and strove to get a hold. At other times a wounded fish rose

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to the surface of the water, writhed, spurting its life-blood, and then in dying phosphorescence sank flashing to the depths, like the plunge of a falling star.

It seemed to Dick, with his strong religious instincts, as if he were somehow surprising supernatural secrets which only the angels in heaven should know, and that he was thereby guilty of a sacrilege which would surely count against him in the other world.

But what did the crew care about the damnation of his soul? It was for their welfare, notwithstanding, that he watched and suffered. He stamped with his foot as he groaned out:

“My God—oh, my God!”

Yet even as he gave vent to his misery he did not close his eyes. In reality he saw nothing but shapeless fishes who swam without ceasing, darting swiftly, vaguely, losing themselves in the infinity of the deep.

Suddenly, life became more supportable.

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A sweet stupor invaded his senses, like that which possesses a lover when he clasps his beloved mistress to his breast. He felt supremely happy. A tender sigh broke from his lips. He felt his strength, which had oozed out of him like the shadow of his body in the sun, creeping back again into his frame.

"Don't sleep any more, my lad. I don't know why, but I have a sort of feeling . . ."

It was the skipper's voice.

Slowly opening his eyes, Dick believed he saw afar off, in the light of dawn, a shape which stabbed the horizon and was vanishing into space.

In truth, while he slept a furtive packet had passed. Soon nothing remained of its passage but a dark trailing cloud of smoke, which fluttered its length like a ragged pennant agitated by the wind.

The steamer was gone. Instinctively Dick sprang forward as if to arrest it. He flung out

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his hands. It was so small a thing of which he had that momentary glimpse.

One does not always instantly comprehend one's futility. Dick, in his present state, did not. His impulse was to leap forward and rake the horizon with his hands, as one scrambles after a disappearing coin. A splendid chance was lost; but he did not at once reflect upon its magnitude: only slowly did despair lay its icy fingers on his heart.

He then had presence of mind to murmur,

"No, sir—I see nothing."

The captain's face turned towards him, strove to pierce the veil. Dick, ashamed of his falsehood, hung his head.

How bitterly he reproached his fatal sleep—his betrayal! How many times an agony of remorse would keep him awake in his berth and cause him to shed floods of silent tears, to wring his hands and moan in a passion of desolation! "Miserable swine that I am, what have I done? What have I done?"

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His remorse at having betrayed his trust was as poignant as that felt by Judas when he beheld Christ nailed to the cross. The lie he had uttered crimsoned his forehead. He got up wildly, staring and running his fingers through his hair. He felt that henceforward he was unworthy to clasp the hand of his captain.

VIII

DURING that day sparks floated before Dick's eyes. He seemed to be witnessing a dance of phantoms. He could not distinguish even the form of the main-sail of the ship. Tears sprang to his eyelids. When he dried them, he found he could no longer make out the sun which shone over the waves. He thrust his head forward, with that strained expression common to those who listen eagerly for the slightest sound.

The light seemed to emit a final ray and then went out. Objects no longer appeared, even in imagination, before his gaze. All was now extinguished. The shades of slumber gathered about him who slept not.

Gripping the wheel, he held the ship's bows straight towards what they told him was the land. The approaching footfall of the cap-

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tain caused him to shiver. At first his chief groped about, touching each object and walking heavily. Then he paused, surprised at the absence of the customary greeting. Dick took him by the arm and guided him in the right direction. He advanced a pace or two, made a pass in the air, and touched the motionless sailor.

"Well?" he began.

To this there came no response. The captain's hand felt the other's face, and as he did so his touch became understanding—as understanding as the look on the countenance of a mother. He sighed deeply and said, "We must look into this." He uttered the phrase in his old characteristic manner.

He was prepared once more to deal with human weaknesses.

He heard the young fellow droop to a sitting posture. His ear caught the sounds of weeping, as a lover weeps, shamelessly, at the feet of a woman.

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"Come, come!" cried the captain sharply. He helped Dick to rise.

"I can't see—I can't see any more!"

Dick was wailing bitterly.

"Well, well, it was certain to happen."

"But what can we do? What are we now? What are we now?"

"Still men, I hope."

As the captain said this, he felt the presence of another. At the same time he had a subtle intuition that this new-comer had heard his words and approved of them.

"Who is it?" he asked.

The mate, sir," was the quiet reply.

"Ah! You've heard about—about Dick here. We must act at once."

"Ay, ay, sir."

Turning about, the mate groped his way down amongst the sailors.

He never knew who had warned the crew. He found them running about like madmen. One sailor ran full tilt into him, felling the

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mate to the deck. The mate got up, wiped his face and his clothes, and stumbled back to where he had left the captain.

"Have they all gone stark crazy?" he asked, now aware of the blood which dripped from his forehead.

They heard a group of blind sailors screaming passionately, hysterically, as they clung to Dick, adjuring him not to desert them, to go on seeing, to force his eyes to see, for the Lord Christ's sake.

"Come along, Brand," said the captain firmly, "we must talk to these fellows."

But it proved impossible to make them listen to reason. Distracted by fear, they now gave way to the wildest impulses. They even threatened the captain with bodily violence. It seemed to them now that the ship descended endlessly into the void, that the ocean had turned upside down. Gasping for breath they sought self-protection; they clutched at the

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cables, their mouths working convulsively, until suddenly, at the behest of some new idea, they released their hold and broke into flight, crashing down upon the deck with bruised limbs and twisted ankles.

The captain and the mate stayed the rush of one unhappy sailor. Wilcox shouted at him:

"Be quiet, man! Keep calm!"

But they failed to retain their hold; he wrenched himself free, leaving a fragment of his shirt in the captain's hand.

"It is clear they are all mad, Brand; they're gone stark, staring mad!"

In their wild panic some of them leaned over the railing, while others actually began unshipping the boats. But the thought of leaving the ship for the open sea soon caused these latter to descend, several falling down heavily on their backs.

The captain, following in their tracks, con-

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tinued to urge them to return to their senses. For answer they heaped him with reproaches. One voice cried out shrilly:

“It’s your fault! It’s all your fault!”

There was a murmur of approval at this, mingled with oaths and threats. Thus accused the captain straightened himself up and groped his way towards the accusing voice. He found himself in the midst of a mass of now silent mariners, whom he shouldered aside imperiously.

“Who is the man that makes that charge?” he thundered.

On high a sort of croaking came from the rigging.

“Me!”

The master raised his head in a vain endeavour to discern the owner of the voice. He only heard the sound of flying footsteps as the cook descended and made good his escape.

“Cool down. D’ye hear me? Pull yourselves together and act like men. We are not

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far from the trade routes. We must keep on."

"Aye, aye, sir—that we must!" corroborated the Mate.

But the group of sailors was silent. They were huddled close together, shadowy beings who waited for death. When they drew apart, leaving the captain and mate together, their hands hung limp at their sides, and they sank disconsolately down on the deck like so many lost souls.

A sail was heard flapping; in a smooth sea, moving languidly, the *Sea-Shine* wandered whither she listed.

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Another night passed over their heads; none saw the stars. There is no more obscure tomb than the human body; in their life of darkness these men no longer counted the hours.

"Yet we are still men," thought the mate, wakeful in his corner. "We are men still."

Perhaps by the repetition of this phrase the

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mate sought to confirm the trend of his thoughts. After a pause, he went on:

"Where can the captain be? If I should call him now, what will he say? Better await his orders."

Now and then a blind sailor raised his head, with a movement common to the very lowest order of creation, to ascertain his whereabouts. A sense of wide spaces affected him, but stopped short at his eyes. The man, suddenly aware, lowered his head with his hands and wept.

Some who slept cried out in their sleep. Others wakened with a start and, forgetting their blindness, began tearing at the mask which they fancied hid the light, all the while choking like men being smothered. Then when the remembrance of their infirmity came to them, they turned their faces tragically towards the unseen light, silent and despairing.

"We must keep our wits. Whatever happens we must keep sane!"

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Thus the captain, in his turn, spoke aloud, although addressing only himself. He had brooded too much upon his responsibilities, upon the plight of his ship, as he leaned over the taffrail. Now wilder thoughts revolved swiftly, unceasingly, in his brain, producing, however, no more effect than a wheel turning in mid-air.

He had grown feverish, and his frame shivered violently.

"I believe I'm going off my head. . . . I wonder where the mate has got to? What is he doing? Yes, I'm certainly going off my head. If I'm not careful, I'll . . ."

He pressed his head between his strong palms.

"I'd better get below," he muttered. But this was easier said than done, for somehow he seemed to have lost his late dexterity.

Once started, however, he pulled himself together, his muscles all tense, for a supreme effort.

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He advanced, but his head instantly collided violently with some object. He felt the wheels accelerate in his brain. He was seized with vertigo and crashed down upon the deck.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned, "I have gone mad." He felt himself rolled, shaken, crushed, moving rapidly towards perdition. Then the thought came to him,

"All the same—I am still master of this ship!" It electrified him. It restored his manhood, his powers of resistance. The next moment he was on his feet, grasping the railing, moving slowly with his weight pressed against it.

"I'm the master of this ship!" he said again.

His firmness increased; he continued to grope along, testing every object in his path.

"My cabin's yonder. Here's the cook's galley. This is the main-mast. Here is——
Hullo! what's this?"

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His foot had touched the prostrate body of a man, who was moaning to himself,

"Mad! Mad—quite mad."

"Imbecile!" thundered the captain.
"You're no madder than I am. Get up."

He was himself again.

He shouted for all hands to assemble on deck. But the mate alone answered his summons.

"Ah, Mr. Brand, you are there! Good, I want you."

"Ay, ay, sir," responded the mate.

Albeit nothing further was uttered between them, the mate sat down and waited. His thoughts ran on the behaviour of the crew. Why had they suddenly acted thus? Had they fancied some fresh danger—that some new crisis was imminent?

"Their fear of death is pitiful. I wonder if they know how little death means to me?"

Leaning against the railing the captain also meditated. Whole hours rolled by. The

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captain knew that the night was past by the warm, dry feel of the shrouds.

Once more he called out to the crew, summoning them by name, one by one. But they were seemingly sunk in lethargy, hardly moving their heads or even lifting their eyelids at the summons. They looked like men silently awaiting their doom. Whether stretched out at full length or doubled up in pain, they were as motionless as if they were strapped down to the deck.

Yet despite this physical stagnation their minds were unusually active. Each man was in his own way speculating upon his fate, trying to imagine what form it would take. The space of time which separated them from death became, for these beings to whom the physical world would be evermore invisible, as transparent as a sheet of glass.

Why were they endowed by Providence with hearts which responded to emotion, minds which conceived, nerves which felt the

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magnetism of touch, if all these miraculous, harmonious organisms were destined in the prime of their being to rot henceforward, for ever, in the slimy caverns of the ocean? Was it possible that life had been wrought of such tenacity, merely in order to prolong their present torments?

By what right were they thus cast adrift . . . helpless in the midst of a pathless ocean? If this was the work of God, then . . .

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In vain the captain sought to restore their faith and courage. His sentiments, downright and rough, were flung right and left amongst them like swords. But none seized them; the men were in no fighting mood. Seemingly, nothing sufficed to rouse them to battle.

It was only later that a vague disquiet forced them to bestir their sluggish limbs. A hitherto unknown sensation, more imperious in man than love itself, began to assert its

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power. A craving greater even than their craving for sight, impelled them at last to action. The pangs of hunger drove them forth to seek food.

They called loudly for the cook. In a corner, flattened out like a crab, this individual did not answer. His misery was giving way to a malicious joy. As he cowered close to these famished men he held his breath, so that they should not detect his presence.

He heard them moving about, their hoarse voices demanding food like so many hungry animals, and chuckled maliciously to himself. Then came another voice, quite close to him:

"The men have got to be fed somehow."

The next thing he knew a heavy weight was flung upon the cook, who strove to utter a yell; but a pair of fists seized his throat and all but choked him. When they relaxed he shrieked for help, and as this was not forthcoming he pleaded with his adversary for mercy. Not, however, until he had been well

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cuffed did the mate release his hold, and rising, wipe his hands of blood, for in the course of receiving a much-needed lesson the cook's nose had suffered.

"Now go and prepare the soup, you little cur!" commanded the mate.

The cook instantly professed his readiness to obey.

"All right, Mr. Brand," he spluttered. "All right! But when we get into port, mark my words—I'll have the law of you for this!"

He even went on to mumble something about certain puffed-up ship's officers, who would one day bitterly regret, when they came to stand in the dock, having unjustly struck a hard-working and unoffending member of the crew.

In return the mate freely admitted that a human curiosity like the cook might easily excite the misplaced sympathy of a jury ashore, but everything must be taken in its due season, and at present the best advice he could

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give the cook was to step lively and obey orders. Saying this, the mate hauled him up by the collar and launched him very adroitly into the midst of his pots and pans in the galley. There, once his equilibrium was assured, the cook groped about whimpering, found his galley-fire, and then, instead of bursting into tears, went off into a fit of hysterical laughter.

The captain was not without some experience of men reacting from violence or despair, and had listened to wild bursts of unnatural laughter from men whose nerves were shattered; but he could not hear the cook's insane merriment without revulsion.

"The unholy little beast!" he muttered. "What can you do with a thing like that, that hasn't even a quarter of a soul in its carcase?"

The cook took his revenge in his imagination, which was uncanny and exuberant. He

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conjured up a delightful image of the captain suspended by the neck, his head hanging sideways and a blue tongue hanging out, while the mate, similarly swinging the end of a greasy rope, was gasping horribly for breath, making a sound like a locomotive passing through a tunnel.

Even this delectable vision did not wholly satisfy the cook. The hate he felt for these two tyrants continued after their imaginary decease. He found no little ecstasy in the savage maltreatment of their corpses. He pictured himself stabbing them with a long stick as they swung to and fro, while crying out to a large and sympathetic multitude:

"It was *I* who did it! It was *I* who rid the world of this pair of villains!"

Solaced thus by his imagination, which was truly diabolic, the cook tackled the job in hand with a lighter heart. Even though he repeatedly burnt himself trying to relight his

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stove and the galley reeked with smoke, he persisted, and at length the big cauldron of soup was ready.

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Twenty hours rolled by.

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“**I**S that you, Mr. Brand?”

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied the mate.

“I’ve been looking for you,” went on his chief.

“I’ve been doing the same for you, sir,” said the mate. “The best way for us in future would be to whistle, don’t you think?”

“Yes. We mustn’t waste any more time; for we’ve been wasting time. A ship could pass near us without ever guessing our condition. If we are to be saved we mustn’t miss any more chances. One of the crew ought to be posted at all hours to warn us if there is any reply to our signals of distress or if they hail us by trumpet. Let him have rockets close at hand. D’ye follow me? And now let’s go along to the crew.”

It was in vain that the captain threatened

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the sailors who were lying or lounging about the deck, and tried to rouse them from their torpor: all he could elicit was vague muttering, groans, and reproaches. The men had ceased to hope for any succour; they no longer believed in the possibility of rescue.

One of them, mooning about, passed near the mate, who promptly laid hold of him. The sailor sought to wrench himself free, struggling like a beast caught in a trap.

"What d'ye want o' me?" he roared angrily. When the mate had succeeded in quieting his insane fears he began clutching his long beard.

"Lookee, mate," he whimpered foolishly, "what if my missus could see me now?"

The mate was taken aback by such crazy irrelevance.

"Oh, think of that another time, Johnson," said the mate soothingly.

"Aye, that's all very well," groaned the other. "But you don't know my missus!"

The mate bore patiently with the man.

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"Your wife will be glad enough to see you, my lad. But if she's ever going to see you at all, you've got to listen to reason now."

He forthwith led Johnson forward and carefully explained just what duty was wanted of him, leaving him at last seated in an attitude of more or less alertness at his post. For a time the sailor continued to sit there with his chin resting on his hands; but by degrees his former apathy returned, and he totally forgot what he had been instructed to do. It was far too subtle for his dimmed intelligence.

What his poor mind did dwell on was something different altogether. It came to him in a vision, with all the vividness of reality. He saw a little steep stone-paved street, and a tall comely young woman, with long yellow tresses, sauntering down the middle. Her lips wore a happy smile.

Overhead, rows of bleaching linen hung on lines suspended from the cottage windows.

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He knew the scene so well. It was a vision of his wife, that tall, smiling young woman. He, Mark Johnson, the North Sea sailorman, had married her just before signing on for his first long voyage.

"What would she say if she could see me now!"

He shook his head with infinite melancholy.

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A curious prolonged whistle sounded, and the mate, following the sound, found himself in the neighbourhood of the skipper.

"I've put one man on the job, sir," he reported.

"Good! And now let us light up the signals of distress."

They joined hands and went in quest of oil. Whenever, in his progress, the captain's touch fell on any of the crew he tightened his grip and bade the man follow him and obey orders.

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Being afraid of his masterful ways, most of the crew, when they heard him coming, edged away and vanished. But two at least remained by his side and followed him into the hold. The exact whereabouts of the oil supply baffled them. They ransacked the hold for hours. Everything seemed in frightful disorder. The captain lost his temper and turned on the mate.

"You seem to have neglected this, Mr. Brand. I ought to have looked after it myself."

The mate did not take umbrage. He had arranged everything methodically, at a time when he had the full use of his eyes. Now, each time that his hand struck a sack of provisions or a barrel of ship's stores he seemed to recognise it. He would exclaim, "Ah, here are the nails—the oil must be only a few steps off." But each time he was mistaken. The oil was not there. The whole space appeared to have altered its dimensions.

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How many times did it happen that, when they searched for the simplest commodities which ought to have been close at hand, they were far distant or else totally undiscoverable. When would these blind mariners become fully habituated to their surroundings?

As the men were growing restless, the captain suddenly abandoned the quest.

On deck he again reflected on the hugeness of his task. So many difficulties attached to the simplest effort! What would happen when he had to solve the problem of damaged rigging and tackle and torn sails?

"And what port is it we are really making for? Precisely what route are we taking?" It was really staggering.

But he had accomplished something—oh, yes, he had accomplished something! With the active and loyal collaboration of the mate (whom he would not fail to commend to the owners on their arrival in port) one man of

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the crew of fifteen was on watch and two others were taking his orders!

Nevertheless, the days passed and the skipper's plans for the ship's deliverance were still only in their first stage. The crew still remained helplessly aloof. For too long they had wholly depended on the master's initiative: when he went blind it was the vigilance of the mate they relied on. Afterwards, they had centred all their hopes and efforts on Dick. Now, morally lost, plunged in melancholy stupefaction, they seemed to have yielded up their manhood. Nothing could vanquish their inertia.

With their movements restricted, they had only a vague sensation of life and what was happening about them. They knew that the sea was calm, that the sun was hot, that the cool spots on deck were the shadows, that everywhere there were solid angles and projections against which they bruised their

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limbs. Also, they knew the whereabouts of the cook's galley, because of the delicious odour of beef and onions or skilly which drew them thither at regular intervals like a magnet.

This purely sensual conception of their surroundings tended to dwarf all their general ideas of life and conduct. An over-mastering wretchedness held their souls in thrall; the fact of their blindness was a perpetual torture.

It was when they had satisfied their hunger for food that their craving for sight grew most poignant. They would thrust their eyes up into the air with a pitiful straining, as if seeking relief from the salty ozone, as young animals seek relief when teething by gnawing wood or even stones. They rubbed their eyelids until they were half flayed and bleeding. Then, holding their breath, they opened them suddenly, as if, by a supreme effort of will and muscle, sight would return to them.

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The process was always being repeated. They were always on the very verge of seeing. They were full of curious theories as to the cause of their affliction. But the sombre shadows in which they dwelt never lifted.

They were often abandoned to self-pity; at other times they gave way to fits of rage. They shook their fists and beat upon the railing with their feet. One singular illusion they had. It was once when, reclining in a row, the sun suffused their bare feet; they felt the grateful warmth stealing up and up; they had a strange sensation of light on their bared skins; they waited in excitement: this time the light would come. But no; it stopped short at their cheeks. The blessed light could not enter: the door of the mansion was closed and bolted.

Meanwhile, under the hot rays of the sun, the sails and tackle shrunk and the sapless masts cracked. The faces and bosoms of the men reddened and blistered. Their eyes were

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ever open in a wide stare, like startled children. They still continued to try further devices to stimulate their paralysed vision into activity.

What feverish hours they passed in these vain endeavours! All else was forgotten.

When they began to feel chilly they knew that night was closing in. The long day of effulgent glory had passed invisibly over their heads. They had caught no glimpse of it. Yet the consciousness that the shadows of night now enveloped the ship brought them a vague solace. Even men whose sight was in full vigour could now see only the silhouettes of things. The tall masts and broad sails were in deep shadow. Consequently, the crew suffered at such times less than in broad daylight. Hunger came again upon them. They felt anew the craving for food.

Their audible misery brought unalloyed pleasure to one man, and that was the cook. It even made him forget his own misfortune.

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Moving awkwardly, perpetually burning himself at his blazing fire, he capered about joyfully. He whistled a jig, which was cut short by a loud banging on the door of the galley. He went out angrily to parley with the hungry sailors. He swore it was not yet supper-time and that he was utterly worn out trying to feed so many idlers who did nothing all day but eat. The crew took his complaints quietly enough—they knew it was dangerous to quarrel with the cook—and he heard them sigh deeply and fling themselves down one by one to await the coming meal.

Chuckling with malice, the cook went back to his stove, where the invisible fire again scorched his fingers.

When the soup was ready he carried it to them in a huge kettle.

"There you are!" he jeered. "Go on;—help yourselves! Fight for your shares, and may the greediest win—pack of fresh-water bargees that you are!"

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Luckily, at that moment the mate appeared, and his calm voice appeased the insulted crew.

If the cook did not completely ruin the soup, it was because such a proceeding might have reflected upon his culinary skill. His inordinate vanity protected them from this particular expression of his malice.

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As time went on, despite themselves, despite their paralysed will-power, life continued to surge in their veins. Their present plight gave birth to a new set of sensibilities: a fresh outfit of nerves which guided their movements. It was singular with what facility, for example, they found their way to the cook's galley; they could go there instinctively, without even groping.

They learned to discern a presence, at no matter what distance, by sound. Without any express wish on their part a new world of sensibility was revealed to them, by way of

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compensation for the world of vision they had lost. Hitherto they had listened to sounds with indifference; now to every noise they attached a significant image. Sounds that had hitherto gone unregarded in a sort of general confusion, were now classified. They were able to separate and verify each tone in the universal tumult.

Thus it was that, for the first time in their lives, they really heard the sea. They listened to its muffled hum on the far horizon. Nearer, they detected its other accents. Each billow that dashed itself against the sides chanted its death-song. Nearer, yet other sounds were revealed. From all over the ship did there not proceed the manifold murmurs of a human habitation?

The parched sails at noon, or the same sails moist with the evening breeze, yielded different sounds to ears grown perternaturally acute. The dry timber of the yards when struck gave forth a sharp vibration like

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breaking glass. The ropeless blocks whistled unceasingly like cabin-boys in port.

All these new characteristics of every-day sounds, all this volume of sound hitherto inaudible, deeply impressed the crew. It seemed to bring them within the confines of a new sonorous world, replete with unguessed harmonies.

The mate found the subject a fruitful theme for speculation.

"The more subtle our senses are, the more marvels we lay hold of. There's an idea! Perhaps all the charms and wonder of heaven are round about us here and now on earth, if only we could reach outside the prison-walls of our bodies. If we could only develop all our faculties, perhaps we, here below, could understand God and His mysteries better!"

He had some notion of imparting this philosophical discovery to the captain—but he checked himself.

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"It wouldn't interest him," he thought. Then he added:

"Besides, it isn't exactly new."

Leaning against a mast he found relief in letting his imagination soar into the firmament.

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Soon it came about that, from this infinite darkness which cloaked the vision of the crew, one guiding star of sense emerged and daily grew brighter. They could now guide themselves with the aid of a lantern whose single ray illumined their pathway, as if each were a traveller at midnight over a wild and deserted moor. The sense of touch had become super-normal.

Their hands had been brutalised before. A seaman's life had hardened them; the skin had been toughened by toil; the sea salt had incrusted it, so that a thick shell had grown up between their inner selves and the life of the world. Inactivity served to refine their

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hands. They developed the sensitiveness of antennæ, such as insects have, and vibrated with delicate sensibility. Already these blind men could discern in the mystery of the prevailing obscurity things till then unknown. Wonder of wonders, they learnt by the simple touch of their fingers the difference between the silk of daylight and the gossamer of night.

The relation between touch and the properties of light was revealed to them. Their fingers rested gently on objects, and the colour of these objects appeared in their mental retina as if their fingers had reflected the light. It was thus that they reconstituted their memories. They were able to live more easily and happily, notwithstanding their pitiful state. In time, they could even make merry over a shipmate who tripped over a rope. Occasionally, two men bumped into one another; hands would instantly begin feeling hands, faces, clothing, until each would proclaim laughingly the other's identity. But

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woe to the man who hesitated to make acknowledgment. The impatience and irritation of these blind men were as abnormal as the condition of their nerves, and angry blows were not infrequent.

There was another thing: their old relations amongst themselves underwent a change. Former friendships cooled and new ones were formed.

Into this strange new course of life the Russian entered most fervently. The very darkness became an inspiration. Certain racial instincts awoke in him. His mind surged with vague mysteries of the past—belonging to prehistoric centuries: legends which perhaps his ancestors had jabbered in their caves, while the mammoth and the sloth roamed without in the icy vapours of the long night.

Hereditary souvenirs such as these floated upwards into the Slav's consciousness and found a vent in speech. When the fit was on him he broke into a weird chanting, where the

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words resembled the cries of a wild animal rather than any human speech. The crew sat about spellbound. They experienced an inexplicable anguish in hearkening to these unwonted sounds; their intelligence became tarnished as a mirror is tarnished by a rude breath; they felt like crying out, answering these primordial gutturals by a gibberish of their own, which also welled up obscurely within them, struggling for utterance. But such sounds had lost their meaning for them, and, moreover, their common sense returned in time to save them from such a display of animalism. But the Russian fascinated them nevertheless. They pressed close about him while, like one possessed, he emptied his heart in wild, burning words whose significance they could not fathom. They kept time to the rhythm of his chant by the motion of their bodies, as they sat spell-bound around him.

The captain and the mate disturbed these proceedings when they came to withdraw a

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man for watch duty, and so broke up the circle. The Russian stopped instantly, the rest struggled to their feet, and the sailor, whose turn it was, departed in ill-humour.

Distracted in spirit, not knowing what to do with themselves, the crew roamed about aimlessly. In these perambulations their hands were ever active, so that gradually all objects became familiar to them by touch. With an insatiable curiosity they omitted nothing; they fingered each surface caressingly, striving to recall its colour.

This complete transformation of the character and aptitudes of the crew was not lost upon the captain, who at last held a conference with the mate.

"We can't go on for ever like a pack of caged beasts. My ship only asks to be navigated, and navigated it must be. . . . Merely because we've had a stroke of bad luck . . . Well, you understand . . . we've simply got to do something—to get busy. You are first

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officer of the ship, and there's work to do. . . . We'll have need of every man-Jack shortly. Every man to his post. And, while you're about it, shake up the boatswain; he needs it especially. . . . D'ye understand?"

"Ay, ay, sir. I'll try them again."

The mate rejoined the crew in the galley. It was the dinner-hour. He spoke to them. He conjured them, as good seamen all, to show their manhood and courage and readiness to take all chances.

They listened to his words apathetically, dully, shaking their hands at the hopelessness of any further effort. It was clear they all of them expected to be saved by a passing steamer without further exertion on their part. Meanwhile they just wanted to be let alone.

As the mate went on to reason with them, some of them yawned. Others idly chewed splinters of wood listlessly. But the mate was now fully roused, and he treated them this time to the most violent tongue-lashing they

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had yet listened to—telling them a few rough home-truths which even his chief had hitherto refrained from uttering.

It did the business: it roused them. They were all standing now. One could feel in the atmosphere of the galley that vibration of coming storm which plunges a swarm of hornets into a blind fury.

The mate divined that their heads were lowered darkly, as if for combat. He realised that he was at that moment confronted by human beings whose crude, primitive emotions throbbed in their bosoms like a motor-engine. But he was accustomed to deal with men. He ended his speech by a quick, sharp order.

“Every man to his post, d’ye hear? Step lively!”

Rebelliously inclined as they were, and breathing heavily in anger, yet they submitted. First one man and then another broke away and groped his way to starboard, in quest of his post.

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"It's a cryin' shame!" one protested, but he too went.

The mate drew a breath of intense relief. The crew were returning to discipline at last. No longer must they be allowed to rust in idleness, they must re-acquire the habit of effort, which would grow with continuous exertion. So he followed them, issuing further orders; he was perpetually on their heels. What he asked them to do seemed at first too hard to perform; they became discouraged, stumbled and fell and were again on the point of defiance. But the sense of discipline was in their blood, and so, with infinite groping and fumbling and cursing their hard lot, they resumed their set tasks. And whatever they were they always kept at them until they were finished.

One day a sailor, snorting with satisfaction, his clothes smeared with filth, reported that he had found the missing oil for the lanterns. He rolled the barrel on deck, sat on the head

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and basked smugly in the general approval.

In consequence of this happy discovery, a topsman had to be named to fetch down the lanterns at the mast-head, light them, and return them to their place.

The mate made his decision. "Jimmy!" he called out. The mariner addressed heard, and almost had a fit. In his confusion he dug at the roots of his hair and rolled his head about in the direction of his shipmates, as if searching their opinion of the outrage. As this opinion was not vouchsafed to him, he put on an aggrieved air, and asked why the mate did not order him to climb up to heaven and be done with it—it was the same thing. He continued to stand still, with his hands pressing against his flanks.

"Come—obey orders!" cried the mate, reaching out and prodding Jimmy. At this the boatswain, in order to demonstrate his sympathy and reinstate himself in the favour of the crew, murmured,

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"Hard luck, Jimmy! I can't see how it can be done myself—but——"

"Are you going to obey orders or not?" interrupted the mate.

Perceiving expostulation was useless, Jimmy laid hold of the rope ladder, gripping it strongly and began his ascent. Much to his surprise and that of the assembled crew, and although at first his body seemed as heavy as lead, he continued to climb. With each yard the ascent grew easier. He laid hold of the extinguished lanterns and returned with them in safety to the deck. They were refilled and ignited. The crew, now deeply moved, crowded about the lamps, whose flames they could hear but not see. They induced melancholy reflections.

The topsman, Jimmy, returned to the mast-head, clutching the warm lanterns. This time he mounted more slowly, fumbling in parts of the rigging which had grown unfamiliar. As he halted for a moment on a yard-arm,

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tears came to his eyes at the thought that although a bearer of light he would never more behold it, nor the harbour-lights of home, nor the light in the window of his cottage, nor the light in the face of the girl he loved!

Jimmy's feelings overcame him. He wept.

"What's up, mate?"

It was the voice of Dick, who led by some irresistible impulse had followed closely behind, and now joined Jimmy on the yard-arm.

"I dunno. Reckon I got a touch of the blues again—thinkin' o'—well, you know, Dick. Life, an' all that sort o' thing!"

"Hand over the lights, my lad. I'll fix 'em."

Jimmy surrendered his burden without a word.

Dick took the lanterns, but his hand was not very steady. His own face became suddenly tremulous. The warm air from the flames also recalled to him something tender and very

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precious which he had lost. It was only with an effort that he bestirred himself and fitted the lights, one above the other, in their sockets by the mast.

Jimmy remained in his doubled-up posture on the yard-arm, a prey to melancholy. At one moment he wondered whether it was worth while coming down again at all—whether he had not better stay where he was and starve to death and leave his body there as a sign to the world of his despair and the tragedy of his life. It was no use going back home, even if such a thing were possible. Happiness was for ever over for him. By that time his sweetheart would have gone off with another, and even if she had remained faithful the sight of him would induce her to break her vows.

When Jimmy had wept enough to relieve his feelings he became conscious of a craving in the pit of his stomach. It was heightened by the grateful odour which reached his nos-

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trils from below, and he descended to draw his dinner rations.

"Are you sure everything is going on all right?" demanded the skipper, for the third time.

The mate reported that all was well. He drew a deep breath, full of invigorating ozone. He felt his blood coursing anew in his veins.

"We've done everything that's possible, sir. While there's life, there's hope?"

The captain was a little surprised at the mate's tone of confidence. He thought of a shipwrecked man, hugging his spar to his bosom as long as his strength held out, even though the water was icy, the horizon was bare, and the chances overwhelmingly against him. If he refrained from reproving the mate's optimism, he did not applaud it.

"Well, at least the ship keeps sound," he muttered grudgingly, between puffs from his pipe.

X

DURING many days the captain and the mate sat with their hands on their knees, basking in the sun, striving to ascertain the direction of that celestial body. They felt its rays, but as to its situation the opinion of the two men differed. The sailors, grasping the rigging, balanced themselves on deck, awaiting the result of the investigation.

At last one morning the captain stretched out his hand and, with his finger pointing like a magnetic needle, declared:

“North is *there!*”

All the men involuntarily turned their heads.

“To your posts. To your posts!” commanded the mate briskly.

One heard them scatter about, some jumping over the coiled ropes, light-hearted once more.

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The captain held his head so high that the back of his neck was wrinkled: he was like a man inspired. Then suddenly the mate whistled.

They made ready. The *Sea-Shine* was to tack, then move ahead, straight towards salvation. The sailors spat on their hands. Laboriously they began to hoist the sails. The blocks shrieked, the men encouraged one another by shouting, while on their coppery bosoms the sweat spurted, glistening like seawater on a ship's prow. Sometimes a rope got entangled. It was straightened out and the work went on. The sails were heavy and made their hands bleed; the ropes sawed their fingers and their faces were bruised by the veering yards. But the blood they tasted only lent them the frenzy of combat and a kind of savage joy. The sails expanded. The vessel took its fill of rough wind, rolled heavily on its flank and forged ahead.

They were now off on a splendid adventure,

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darting onward towards some unknown shore, there to find salvation or death, according to the will of God.

Hope filled them with delirium. The thought of the unknown stirred them, and they became as souls possessed, overtaken by the fever which seizes upon gamblers and causes them to rush forth in multitudes towards icy fastnesses on a crusade for gold.

They, too, were gamblers, playing a fierce game, which enchanted, intrigued, fascinated them: into which they put their whole lives.

The *Sea-Shine*, with bellying sails, scoured the high seas.

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Extract from the log of the *Cousin William*, Captain Webber. Mate's report:

"Sighted at ten or twelve knots a three-master in distress. Rigging in bad shape. This vessel failed to reply to our repeated

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signals. Unable to approach the vessel, being hampered by thick weather.

"The helmsman thinks he made out night signals on mizzen, although it was broad daylight. Unable to verify this. Might have been an optical illusion."

XI

IT was wrong of Dick not to report his illness. The sudden lassitude of his young body humiliated him. He wished to exert himself in spite of it. When he was on deck a sudden roll of the ship would make him slip and fall, so he said nothing but climbed up the mizzen-mast, without anybody's knowing of his weakened condition.

Up aloft, he experienced a strange stupor which fascinated him. Vaguely, the voice of the captain reached his ears; the words no longer had their usual compact form, but were magnified as if they issued from a trumpet. His own head appeared to him to have become enormous, and to be filled with darkness.

"Oh, oh!" he groaned, "what's happening to me?"

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He spoke as if addressing a remote person, surrounded by a thick smoke, and who was yet himself.

"But I'm going—going——"

In the dullness of torpor he saw his other self gradually disappear into space.

Relaxing his hold, Dick rolled the length of the hollowed sail. The others heard his body strike the deck with the heavy thud of falling lead.

They carried him against the railing, the mate leaning over him.

"Not yet dead!" he announced, raising his head.

They dashed sea-water over him. He remained, a long time without consciousness, breathing heavily. In that state they carried him below.

"If he has broken any bones, what will we do about it?" demanded the boatswain of one of the hands with whom he was on confidential terms.

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The captain was not far off. His hearing was very acute.

"We will consider that later," was his characteristic response.

He must issue decisive orders.

"Look sharp, boatswain, and fill that unlucky lad's place. It will be better than standing about like a fool."

The boatswain greeted Jimmy.

"Jimmy, my lad," he said, "it will be your turn to go aloft."

There was so much pity in his tone that Jimmy felt himself turn cold.

"You're sending me to my death this time, sure," he muttered.

The boatswain gripped his hand affectionately.

Such warmth of affection left no doubt of his unhappy destiny in the mind of the new look-out man.

Half way up the ladder, he stopped.

"Ah," he murmured, "I ought to have given

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my watch to someone to send to my mother."

Hours later, on returning to the deck, he stood for a long time panting; his knees knocked together when he recalled the dangers he had run. However, when by chance he came alongside the boatswain he was quite cheerful.

"Excuse me, bo's'n," he said, "but what was it exactly you was a-feared about?"

.

For three days Dick lay at the point of death; his soul opened and then closed the gate of heaven. At length his respiration grew more regular. It was so very subdued that they thought he was going to die. When he awoke, the boatswain said to him.

"Stir your legs a little, my lad."

"You take this bandage off my head," exclaimed the sick man. "Take it off or by God, I'll——!"

Such sudden vigour astonished the boat-

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swain. His previous sentiments towards the patient altered still further when he received a blow on the mouth.

Dick, leaping up, struck wildly about him. The boatswain wiped his bleeding lips and noted bitterly that one tooth had been loosened.

But what, after collecting his faculties, surprised him most, was to hear Dick calling out,

"They have bandaged my head up a bit too tight. It may be a good joke, but I've had enough of it!"

Whereupon he climbed up on deck. The sailors could not help grinning at his escapade. But when he actually bumped into the skipper, crying,

"I want to be allowed to see! Order 'em to let me, Captain?"

To *see!* His companions fairly choked with amazement. It was stupendous!

"Did you hear what he said to the Old Man?"

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The cook growled, the dull anger of a dog defending a bone, and it was divined that the day was bound to come when the cook, too, would address the skipper in terms even less respectful.

For a whole week Dick was "off his head," leading the life of an imbecile. He romped near the cook's galley, picking up the indignant cook and carrying him about in his arms, playing with him in spite of his protests. He indulged in all sorts of mad extravagances.

At length his senses returned. He knew then that he had once known—and never again would know—the light of day. More than ever now he longed with a melancholy ardour for that boon which in his spell of madness he had forgotten.

XII

THE topsman crossed the deck. He could not be quite sure what it was that had attracted his attention, but he stood motionless, with ears strained towards infinite space. With a weary gesture he dismissed the queer delusion that he had heard a mysterious sound coming from the distance.

He shook his head several times, shrugged his shoulders, and resumed his walk. Nevertheless, the strange idea persisted in annoying him, just like a troublesome insect, which always alighted in the same spot, settled itself and sucked his blood. He drew a deep breath to allay the furious beating of his heart.

"It's impossible!" he muttered aloud.

He repeatedly told himself to be sensible, to pay no attention; but his feet halted again.

"There *is* something—I do hear—but—no, no; it's just imagination."

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Yet, in spite of what his reason told him, he raised his head again and listened with painful intentness.

He longed for the power to stifle the wind as one quenches a bonfire. But, rising above the wind and the waves, there was certainly a noise—growing nearer, louder and still louder.

He paled, and muttered again,
“It’s impossible! I’m dreaming.”

He went over and spoke to a group of the crew.

“Do you fellows hear anything—anything out of the way?”

His question startled them almost as much as if he had yelled out to them for help. They were quick to guess their shipmate’s state of mind; the very inflexion of his voice betrayed him. They all strained to listen, with the fearful apprehension of a woman who, awakened by a noise in the night, fancies she hears the footfall of a robber.

They heard many sounds, insignificant, al-

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most imperceptible to any sense less acute than their own. But afar off, very, very, remote, the wind bore something—a strange, faint palpitation unheard before. What could it be? Whence did it come?

Around them the dull tumult of wind and waves muffled the distant sound. With their fingers pressed to their lips the men strove to silence their very breathing. From themselves issued no sound. In this silence they could distinguish the gnawing of rats in the hold of the ship; they could hear plainly the soft lapping of the billows against each other. Amidst a hundred delicate tones which were audible and familiar there was certainly another which was wholly unfamiliar.

Yes; it was that of a presence, a steadily advancing presence. There was one pause—a lapse into all but total silence—and in that monstrous silence they distinguished a throb as of machinery—a recurrent pulsation which thrilled them in every fibre. This time there

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could be no mistake; somewhere, not too far off, the screw of a steamer lashed the waves.

Their blood leapt in their veins, their faces flushed crimson, and one cry sprang to their lips:

"A steamer! It's a steamer!"

An excited sailorman rushed off in a frenzy to spread the glad tidings.

The captain was told, and turning to the mate, asked stolidly,

"Have you observed any sound of a steam-vessel, Mr. Brand?"

"No, sir," answered the mate. "Nothing at all!"

"I'm hanged if I ever heard the sound of a steamer unless she were within hailing distance. And she hasn't——"

"Shut up! Shut up!" vociferated several voices.

The captain sprang up indignantly.

"I'm the master of this ship," he began.

But he checked himself. The crew had

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again abandoned themselves to a kind of delirium. What was the good of trying to enforce discipline at such a moment? A deafening thunderclap might have done it; a fatal bolt of lightning might have reduced the crew to silence; but no means he could possibly command. He called out again to the mate,

"They're suffering from a delusion. No steamer ever——"

"Silence! Shut up!" bawled one of the crew, moving towards them menacingly.

"Maybe it's a sort of intuition, sir," suggested the mate.

The captain recognised that nothing should be neglected which might save the ship, and although he remained utterly sceptical he thought it prudent to send up distress signals. Rising, therefore, he roared in tones which could be heard above the babel.

"Avast there! If there's a steamer within

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sight, well, signal her. Fetch the rockets—quick, the rockets!”

“Perhaps he’s right,” thought the mate. When they heard the order, the sailors began running aimlessly hither and thither, and one could hear nothing but the patter of their bare feet on the deck.

“Hold hard, mates!” called Dick plaintively; “I can’t hear the engines now.”

“Be quiet, all of you!” ordered the boatswain, in despair. “How can we hear if you go on making all that row?”

They subsided at once, to resume their listening. This time they listened so earnestly, so profoundly, that Nature herself might have yielded up to them her inmost secrets, could they but have interpreted her voice.

The captain listened, too, with all his might.

“Not a sound,” he declared at length, break-

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ing the silence. "I hear nothing; absolutely nothing."

"Ay, ay. To larboard! to larboard!" bel-
lowed one man, extending his arm over the
ship's side.

"No, there—there—yonder!" cried another,
pointing in an entirely opposite direction.

In an access of blind folly, a third convinced
that the imaginary steamer was quite close,
screamed at the top of his voice,

"Help, ahoy! Help, ahoy!"

He would have continued yelling thus if a
broad palm had not been clapped over his
mouth.

"Shut your jaw, you spalpeen! You keep
the rest of us from hearing!"

In spite of the injunction another shout
went up.

"Where's the captain? Where is he?"

"I'm here," responded the skipper, in a
firm voice. "And less noise, all round.
What is it you want? The ship isn't on fire."

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Once more the man shouted out as if he were addressing a comrade aloft in the rigging.

"The mate says they can't find the rockets, sir!"

"Where are they, then?"

"Nobody knows, sir. They must have been took."

"Who has taken them?"

"I dunno," answered the man doggedly.

"Then you ought to know," declared the captain.

"For God's sake, sir," called out another sailor, seizing the captain's arm, "make 'em find the rockets. Make 'em find 'em."

"Ay, ay, we must signal at once—or we're dead men!" observed the boatswain solemnly.

"Don't let's get out of their sight! Don't let's get out of their sight!"

This last injunction came from the cook, who capering about in his excitement ended by landing himself in the captain's lap.

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"You damned little whipper-snapper!" exclaimed the outraged chief. "Mind where you're going!"

At that instant a topsman roared down from aloft:

"I hear it—I hear it plain!"

In his delirium he missed his footing on the ladder and fell on the deck half stunned. But he was only quiet for an instant. The next moment he was up, facing the crew, shouting at them, directing them, giving them orders.

The crew, listening to his volley of words, his sheer assurance, his audacity, his apparent command of the situation, hesitated for a moment, and then they obeyed him.

The captain could hardly credit his senses. He began to splutter a protest.

"Who the——! What the——!"

But the crew had deserted him; they were attacking new tasks at the behest of the usurper and the decks were cleared swiftly.

There was a crowding on of canvas, and the

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helm was pressed down so hard to port that the ship lurched heavily, the waves breaking over the taffrail.

The captain swayed where he stood, his mind in a whirl.

"Who is the idiot? Who is the idiot?" he kept demanding. But nobody answered him.

A sailor frantically tore past him.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Where the devil are you going? There is no steamer there; I tell you. There is no steamer anywhere. Where are you——"

But he addressed the empty air.

The most attractive falsehoods are always these which float up out of the mirage of a man's own mind in order to deceive him. Born of his imagination he believes in these illusions to the extent that he believes in himself. Yet he is not their sole parent. Each human soul is wedded, as we know, to a fairy, and it is this fairy, and not himself, who orders the household.

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With their tortured eyes beset by phantasms, they conjured up in their simplicity a smooth, clear, sunlit horizon, whereon a great liner steamed, sending forth an imposing plume of smoke of the intense blackness of Chinese ink.

Where was the vessel? Ah, that was the difficulty! That was a point upon which no two of them could agree.

"It is yonder to larboard; of that I am certain," pronounced one.

Another was so incensed by this opinion, so contrary to his own, that he denounced the speaker as a traitor, and struck him.

That they might steer the vessel according to their several notions the crew fought like madmen for a place at the helm. They struggled, raged, and swore; they even bit the hands which gripped the wheel to force them to relax their hold. In the *mêlée*, one of their number was knocked down and trodden under foot, lying there senseless, while the regular

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steersman was kicked in the stomach and left writhing in agony.

Amidst all this the *Sea-Shine* floundered. Uncertainly it wobbled this way, and that in the leaping water, alternately rolling, pitching, and plunging.

"Avast there!" called the mate. "We've found the rockets. All hands for'ard!"

There was a wild rush in his direction. The receptacle was snatched violently from his hands. The bombardment began.

"Not that way, you maniacs! Not that way!" roared the captain, when he discovered what was happening.

But the crew was beyond instruction or restraint. The air thickened with smoke; there was an overpowering smell of powder. In a few moments the whole supply was exhausted and the men stood rigid—on the tip-toe of expectancy.

The disappointment that followed was

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cruel. When the echoes of the explosions had ceased to vibrate and silence once more reigned over the sea, they set up a tragic cry.

"They don't hear us—they don't answer us!"

"Then, begorra, go after them!" bellowed a big man ferociously. He was blackened with smoke and his hands and face were bloody, giving him the aspect—could one but have seen him—of a murderous pirate.

The captain wrung his hands.

"I can't control these madmen," he exclaimed despairingly.

He laid hold of the mate's arm and together they groped their way to their joint cabin.

There he flung himself down at full length in his berth. But he could not remain quiet. Twenty times he requested the mate to go up on deck and report what was actually happening. Each time his solitary disciple returned with the tidings that the men were still "unmanageable."

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They were unmanageable. Men do not easily tear the last hope out of their hearts or abandon an illusion as sweet as life itself.

Still in their ears sounded the throbbing of the steamer's engines, and ever still they headed the prow of the *Sea-Shine* in a vain pursuit of a mocking will o' the wisp which sped over the troubled surface of the broad ocean.

.

"They have given up their steamer, sir," reported the mate. "They say they don't hear it any more. Poor devils! The whole thing was probably the rattling of a loose block in the shrouds. I admit that with a little imagination, I——"

"They haven't many ideas," said his chief bitterly. "But when they get one fixed firmly in their skulls, it is quite enough to sink the ship."

While they spoke the crew were engaged in

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an orgy of recrimination. They were angry over the whole affair, each one loudly accusing the other of being the cause of it. Their disputes threatened to be interminable. In vain the boatswain urged them to settle down to sleep and forget their troubles. There was little sleep for him or anyone that day.

XIII

A FIST banged down heavily on the table, fairly shook the cabin, precipitating a cloud of dust. The cherished photograph of the captain's wife, surrounded by their five children, flew down from its shelf with a swoop like a huge insect. The mate's speech being violently interrupted in this fashion, he straightened himself up, his lips pressed closely together. His cheeks reddened with anger as if they had received a blow.

Captain Wilcox bent down ponderously, and gathering up the portrait of his family returned it to its habitual resting-place. Then he resumed his speech.

"I tell you again, Mr. Brand, I'm dissatisfied with you. You go too far, and I won't have it. This talk of yours about being taken

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by surprise—about having to cut down the rations, it won't do, d'ye hear? If I can't have confidence in you—well, then—I——”

The sentence ended in a growl. Later, in a different tone, he launched forth into a series of questions without waiting for the mate's replies.

“Did you, or did you not, superintend the foodstuffs when they came aboard? Did you, or did you not, open and inspect the hogsheads of beef and pork? Or did you just take the word of the contractors?”

The mate neither budged nor opened his mouth while the captain went on with his harangue, in which the violence of his resentment disturbed his oratorical fluency. But still more disturbing to him was his subordinate's silence. In the presence of a man who was both reticent and invisible the captain felt very solitary indeed. He returned to the table, and lowered his voice as if forced to commune with himself.

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"What it comes to is that the ship's food supply is nearly gone! And with these crazy loons rampaging about, we don't know where we are. There are no more real sailors afloat in these days. . . . And two hogsheads of pork gone bad—two *hogsheads!*"

In his bitterness the captain thought of what his owners would think of such negligence, and added,

"What a waste of money!"

The mate lifted up his head at this last remark of his chief. It touched him, it testified anew to that simplicity and honesty which the mate admired.

He hadn't the heart to resent the transient injustice of a commander he held in sincere affection, and whom he knew to be a sterling character. His anger died away as he re-seated himself at the table.

"Two hogsheads of pork gone!" the cap-

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tain was saying. "And we have only food aboard for how many days?"

"Perhaps for a week."

At that Wilcox sprang up, livid. He could not have been more revolted if the mate had clapped a red-hot iron to his face.

"Wha—at!"

"Eight days—no longer. I have listed every pound of the stuff myself."

"But we carried a three months' supply when we left port. . . . D'ye mean to say you've—you've let it all go to waste?"

His distress was truly pitiable.

"No, sir, we have fed the crew with it."

"Fed them! To let them waste food at such a rate as that?"

"They haven't wasted it, sir."

Wilcox started again. A thought struck him, and he became lost in meditation.

"How long have we been going on like this, Brand?" he asked, at length.

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The mate hesitated. "I'm out of my reckoning, but I feel very old."

"Ah, yes! Old—very old," echoed the captain. "I feel very old, too, Brand."

"Yes, sir."

"Very old. We are both grown old," murmured the captain again.

A shiver ran through his frame. He felt as if already it carried a superhuman burden of years. He went on, thoughtfully,

"We must ration the crew. Don't throw that pork overboard; perhaps it may somehow come in useful."

He paused.

"One can never tell. . . ."

Again he paused, reflected, and added,

"It could—it might still be——!"

Silence fell upon them both. The captain fancied he felt the cold finger of Death touch his forehead, and he shrank from the icy contact. For a moment he was shaken, but quickly collected himself and set about ex-

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amining the new situation and its consequences.

"Better find out if we can catch any fish. Warn the crew—tell them they must deprive themselves—it is a question of life and death. Make them take—— Brand, you don't know how to talk to fellows like this. Now, I——"

The sound of a heavy fall outside the cabin door startled them. Someone was rolling on the floor. They heard him groan several times in evident pain, and then knock violently on the door.

"Are you there, Captain?" he shouted from outside. "I've come to tell you—the cook—the cook——"

"What about the cook?"

"He can *see*. The cook can see!"

When he had delivered this portentous message the sailor regained the deck almost, if not quite, as rapidly as he had come, limping as he went.

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The captain endeavoured to set his wits in order. This news was of vital significance.

If true, it implied a tremendous change in their whole situation. But the suspicions which crept into his mind scattered his high hopes.

"We must investigate. This is going to be a damned ticklish business, Brand."

XIV

PRIDE is the most dangerous of all the sins of mankind. It influences the spirit of man like strong drink. It urges him to vain pretensions which are not founded on merit or justice.

It was when he was under the intoxicating influence of pride that the cook conceived his truly abominable project.

His cardinal grievance was his diminutive size. When he wished to chase the crew out of his galley and laid hands upon a sailor, the latter, by a blow of his fist, knocked him back half senseless amongst his pots and pans. Afterwards, nursing his injuries, he consoled himself by saying, "Henceforth, I will look out for myself. I will watch my chances."

When the whole crew went blind, he was the first to learn the art of guiding himself.

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He became so adept that amidst the various noises on board ship, the tumult of the waves and that of the sails and rigging, he could detect the presence of the captain, not only by his step, but by his manner of breathing. Afterwards he grew able thus to distinguish members of the crew. He acquired extraordinary faculty in apprehending obstacles in his path.

To be able to act so quickly and so easily in the depth of this physical darkness swelled his little soul with vanity. He conceived an even greater degree of contempt for all his groping, stumbling fellows. The injustice was that he still remained the ship's cook: this is what troubled his bulging round head, still so close to the floor, even when in the course of his unwholesome meditations he arose and flung it back defiantly.

Would his wonderful dexterity ever make him more than a butterfly, whose wings have been wetted? Would it ever raise him to that

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high station to which his merit entitled him?

Such thoughts acted as evil counsellors to his actions. He mocked audibly, before the scandalised crew, a captain who was, in his opinion, little better than a strutting parrot. He contrasted his own cleverness, admired himself, became convinced of his own superiority. He became the slave of his deadly vanity.

In his dreams the cook was visited by the most fantastic notions. He actually saw himself in command of a ship—this ship. He was already in imagination the master of the *Sea-Shine*.

When that period should arrive, James Wilcox, the ex-captain, hung with chains which he clanked heavily at every step, went about, with bend head, obeying his, Captain Ezra Chittle's orders, while the mate put in his time greasing Captain Chittle's boots. As for the crew, dominated by his spiritual force

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and manly resolution, they were wholly docile and trembled at his approach.

Drunk with these magnificent and flattering visions, the little cook stalked about the deck, pausing occasionally to wave a dirty paw in the air, with what he conceived to be a regal gesture and to cry,

"I insist on obedience. See that my orders are obeyed!"

Sometimes a delicious thought occurred to him, which made him slap his thigh and shake with shrill laughter. Why should he not take on ex-Captain Wilcox as cook? He would do it!

Men are always prone to allot to others the duties they most detest.

Having revelled in all these wonders in his dreams, the little cook naturally longed to make them realities.

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So one day he commenced to put his great plan into execution.

When his duties in the galley were over he took up his stool and repaired to the neighbourhood of the mizzen-mast. He knew that this was the favorite rendezvous of the crew, where they lounged about at full length and talked over their chances of rescue. He lit his pipe, exhaling great puffs of smoke whose direction he followed by scent, and so noted the course of the ship.

"Fine, clear weather, to-day!" he observed suddenly.

He spoke during an interval of dead silence, so that his ejaculation rather startled the sailors. The cook, perceiving that he had made a sensation, went on to improve it. He drew a deep breath, and laughed quietly as if to himself.

"Absolutely cloudless sky and a fair breeze."

The crew did not know what to make of such talk. What was in the cook's head?

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It made them feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"What's the matter with you, cook?"

The cook laughed again.

"Oh, nothing," he answered; "why?" He spoke with a reticent detachment which made them suspect that he was hiding something from them which they ought to know.

It was pathetic how trifles affected them, and the mysterious light-heartedness of the cook got on their nerves.

"Go and look after our grub instead of hanging about here," one of them advised irritably.

At another time the cook would have responded tartly. But to-day he rose cheerfully on the instant and said,

"You're right, Fowler. I notice the sky's beginning to change."

As he uttered these cryptic words, he paused to note this effect on the group. He could feel them gulp in astonishment; he could almost hear their accelerated heart-beat.

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One of them tried to turn it off, scoffingly.

"Damme if the cook can't feel the clouds with his hands!"

The cook laughed again.

"Well, p'raps I can—who knows?"

He turned about and went back to his galley, whistling, with a quick, confident gait.

The group he quitted were strangely perturbed. They were like children in the dark, and squeezed closely together as if hearkening to some absorbing fairy tale.

"It's mighty queer cook can make out clouds," said one man simply.

"Mighty queer," the rest agreed, until a topsman broke the spell by demanding,

"Who says there are any clouds?"

This brought them back to reason. The cook was mocking them. He was lying. They began to recover from their vague oppression.

Then rain began to fall—drop by drop, spattering on their upturned faces.

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The cook, then, had been right. Clouds had gathered, after all. How could he have known it? A sailor voiced the common thought as he jumped up and took refuge against the mast.

Nobody replied. There was mystery in the air. They began to discuss him afresh. He was far too clever.

They recalled that he moved about with strange ease and freedom in the galley and on deck; that he always recognised them, and called each by name when serving their rations; that he never complained of his blindness; that he always smoked and seemed to enjoy his pipe—and now this!

Was it possible that he alone had retained some glimmering of sight?—that he could partially use his eyes, and had never told them? Or was he actually recovering from the blindness which had struck them all down?

Perhaps he could see outright, and was hiding his secret out of some perversity or

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policy? One could expect any sort of "cus-sedness" from a fellow like that.

They appealed to the boatswain to wheedle the truth out of the cook. But the boatswain by no means relished the job. He declared it couldn't be done, and that in any case he wasn't the one to do it. In the first place, the relations between himself and the cook were by no means cordial; the mission they proposed was incompatible with his position as boatswain; his nerves, and indeed his general health, were just then in a shockingly bad state, and so on.

Having said all this the boatswain, sighing heavily, rose and shaking hands all round, as if he were embarking upon some fatal enterprise, departed for the galley.

"Good-morning, bo's'n," said the cook.

The emissary started violently. He had approached softly on tiptoe, in order to surprise his man. This was a mighty queer beginning. He leant against the door of the

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galley and entered into a vague conversation. The boatswain was nonplussed by the other's disconcerting readiness.

For the cook began reaching out, seizing and opening tins of "bully" beef, using his implements adroitly, slicing bread and bacon, stirring pots of liquid, moving hither and thither with obvious ease and precision.

If the boatswain had been able to use his eyes, he would have been enlightened in a double sense. For the wily cook was for the most part engaged in a useless activity, merely going through a series of noisy motions calculated to deceive his visitor. The latter was overwhelmed at this exhibition of dexterous jugglery, which would have done credit to a man in full possession of his seeing powers.

While the boatswain stood thus at the entrance of the galley he suddenly felt the cook's hand clapped upon his shoulder and his head drawn down to the level of his interlocutor, who, standing on tiptoe, adjusted his

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now, because he knew that, impatient at his obstinacy, the big sailor would grab him and tuck him under his arm and carry him into the skipper's presence if he held back.

Confronted by the master of the ship the cook drew himself up. Already he felt the captain's equal, and even his superior. An insane pride filled his narrow little bosom.

The captain did not speak at once, which caused the diminutive figure before him to stamp his foot impatiently on the deck. The crew clustered round in a circle, listening anxiously.

In firm decided tones the captain began his interrogation. But his first words were cut short by the cook, who cried,

"You'd best take a different tone with me, Mr. Captain. It's not because you're blowing your smoke in my eyes that you're a better man than I am."

"He sees the Old Man's smoke!" marvelled one simple soul in a whisper.

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"That's no answer to my question," declared the captain calmly. "Can you or can you not see? That is what I'm asking you."

The cook pretended to be sick of this persecution. He declared that he wanted to be let alone; in any case, if he was able to see, his eyes belonged to himself, and he could do what he liked with his own. The captain again reminded him that this was no answer to the question he had put.

This persistence apparently exasperated the cook. He feigned to be very angry and wished to return instantly to his galley, where at least he would find peace and quiet.

The crew intervened; they began to coax the little man, who remained obdurate.

The captain then delivered his opinion.

"He can't see any more than a new-born infant. If he could, he'd answer my question, and that's all there is to it."

This was the cook's cue. With affected

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anger he repudiated the captain's base insinuation, and came out flatly and fearlessly with the declaration that he could see.

The cook could *see*! The jubilation of the crew knew no bounds. They laid hold of the little man and hugged him to their bosoms; they lifted him on high, wrung his hands, and shouted praises and congratulations in his ear.

"Silence, all hands," thundered the captain; "I'll talk to this fellow."

It fell like a wet blanket on their new-found enthusiasm. The cook, wiping his face and re-arranging his garments, was well aware that any hesitation on his part would render the crew incredulous—he had better take the offensive himself.

"Let 'em alone, Captain Wilcox. Haven't they a right to their little happiness? You'd try and prevent their breathing if you could. If you don't like to hear the truth I'm sorry

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for you. You'd better go back to your cabin and take off that blue-striped shirt you've got on. It needs a washing badly."

Incredible audacity! But — *blue-striped shirt!* Then the cook really did see! The crew exulted.

In a flash the captain remembered having thrown overboard, in tatters, the only blue-striped shirt that he possessed.

"You little impostor!" he cried indignantly. "I'm not wearing a blue-striped shirt."

"Prove it, then!" rejoined the cook. "Perhaps you think I can't see it. It's not only blue-striped, but its filthy into the bargain. I'm surprised at you—Wilcox!"

The crew was thrilled and speechless. Not content with such unheard-of insolence, the cook went on:

"You don't *want* me to see, Wilcox. You're afraid I'll take your place. That's what you are—afraid. You bully the crew

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and take advantage of them at every turn. You are——”

A brusque intuition made him step aside just in time to avoid a fist which would have knocked him insensible. At the same moment the insulted skipper received into his arms the owner of the fist, who had lost his equilibrium. It was the mate. The cook appealed to the crew for protection.

They were already on his side. The captain realised this from the low growling which reached his ears. It was but too plain that they were on the brink of mutiny, and in his present state he was helpless against them.

Already one murderous rascal was shouting, “Chuck ’im overboard! Chuck the bully over the side to feed the sharks!”

The skipper ground his teeth in impotent rage. He stood his ground, however, while around him the men came and went excitedly. Perhaps they were searching for weapons.

The unhappy boatswain, his forehead

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pressed against the mizzen-mast, waited for the end of the world.

"Madmen! Maniacs!"

The mate contrived to keep close to his chief. Just as they were moving off in the direction of the cabin there was a hurtling noise above their heads and a heavy object fell with a loud crash on an anchor close at hand. It was the capstan bar that someone had thrown.

"Madmen! Imbeciles!"

The captain and the mate re-entered the cabin, the former repeating his denunciation at intervals. When the mate spoke it was gently and carelessly, with no shade of reproach.

"It is evident, sir, that our food won't last much longer, and that we are losing time."

"Idiots! Maniacs!" reiterated the captain.

.
At the other end of the ship, Chittle, the cook, was promising the crew a speedy deliverance, and his words fell on greedy ears.

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Desperate men are an easy prey to the enchanter: they are always prone to believe what they wish to believe.

The cook took a high hand—he was arrogant with them—and they were ready to do his bidding. In the kingdom of the blind, says the proverb, the one-eyed man is king. The cook was an emperor, at least.

“What I expect of you,” he told them, at the end of his harangue—“what I expect of you, is obedience.”

This they pledged him. They were all humility now; did not Mr. Ezra Chittle assure them of their salvation?

XV

DOUBTLESS the truest wisdom lies in never realising one's dreams. All is deception. Even the lover, who at last clasps passionately against his heart the object of his desire, may always read in the eyes of the possessed one the terrible word, "Impostor!" Luckily, the prudent woman nearly always closes her eyes.

The cook was not happy.

The first hour of his triumph had melted deliciously in his mouth. The crew had listened to his orders, and he was obeyed. He took to imitating the captain, shrugging his shoulders like him, borrowing a few of his phrases, as he hurried on their movements.

But it was not long before he had savoured all the delights of his success. He had even gone about repeating the captain's formula:

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"I command this ship!" But somehow the cup of joy no longer stimulated him. The potion, heady at first, now tasted rather flat. He had seen himself, in his visions, a very great man indeed. In reality, what was he? Only a little blind man in the galley aping his betters!

What bitterness! He could not even behold the marvellous spectacle of his triumph over the credulity of the crew!

All he could apprehend was the shadow of the shadow. . . .

The first day, at sunset, wet through with spray, he had exhausted all the satisfaction of being in command of a body of fifteen sailors.

Next day, following a feverish, sleepless night, he sought a renewal of his pleasure of harrying the unfortunate crew.

He followed them about, shouting his orders, dancing at their heels, startling them by his brusque appearances—"giving them the cold shivers!" as one of them said.

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He went farther. When a topsman passed close to him, he launched out a lusty kick at him; when the young fellow protested, the cook accused him of idleness and dereliction of duty. The unfortunate mariner was stupefied, as well he might be.

Meanwhile the *Sea-Shine*, masterless, her sails awry, reeled sluggishly over the waves, or else butted into them with her prow, flinging up huge masses of foaming water, which fell on her decks and even swamped the fore-castle.

At the end of the first watch the sailors felt that all was not going as well as they had hoped: but they confined their misgivings to whispered confidences amongst themselves. Again their hearts grew heavy.

.

All this while the boatswain, stitching a sail by the new captain's orders, thought of the Old Man, now virtually imprisoned in his

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cabin, to whom, by rights, he owed obedience.

"If the Old Man could see—out of only one eye," he murmured to Jimmy, who aided him laboriously in his task, "you would find out how things would move aboard this ship."

The other made no reply, being at that moment engaged in sucking a bleeding forefinger into which he had awkwardly thrust the needle.

"Be on your guard!" thought the boatswain to himself, misconstruing the topsman's silence. "This young fellow is as cunning as a rat behind a sack. I've always had my doubts about him."

And he stitched on, discontentedly.

.

It was the cook's third day as master of the *Sea-Shine*. Irritated by a task which transcended his powers, he exploded over trifles. He felt in his veins a flood of burning quick-

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silver. His bulging temples throbbed; he resembled the frog in the fable on the very point of bursting. What was most intolerable to him was the attitude of ex-Captain Wilcox and the mate, who continued to preserve their official dignity by seclusion in their cabin. This was too much for Captain Ezra Chittle. He resolved to put an end to such a state of things.

As the crew did not dare, in spite of his insistence, to lay violent hands on the deposed officers, Chittle undertook to visit them himself. After banging on the cabin door he summoned them to surrender, and impatiently awaited their answer. Suddenly the door was flung open and a figure bounded forth, with two arms widely extended to seize him like the jaws of a trap.

The cook found himself dashed against the wainscoting. Letting out a yell of fright he saved himself from capture by the skin of his teeth. Only when he had scrambled to the

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other extremity of the ship was he able to recover his breath. His limbs continued to tremble; his fright had been so great that he would certainly not have hesitated to jump into the sea to avoid the captain's terrible fist.

When he had got back his wind his rage returned tenfold; this time he swore to visit it on the crew.

Lantern in hand to sustain the illusion, he went to rouse up the men of the next watch. He swore at them; he administered cuffs to several and hustled them on deck while they were still dazed and heavy with sleep.

Having got together the shivering group, he proceeded to threaten them with the direst penalties if they failed to submit themselves slavishly to his will; he swore that the voyage would never have lasted so long but for their laziness and lack of discipline, and that unless they reformed he would embark in a boat alone, towards some island or some ship, and

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abandon them to their fate without pity.

This produced a prodigious effect. He knew that they trembled with a horrid apprehension. It filled him with joy.

To increase their humiliation he swung his lighted lantern in front of their faces, so that they could feel its heat.

"Blind — blind — blind!" he mocked. "Don't you wish you could see?"

With that taunt Chittle turned on his heel and left them. He groped his way down into the hold, so that he could be wholly alone. There, with his accustomed variableness, hidden amongst the casks and sacks of the cargo, the miserable dwarf burst into tears.

When the sailors were once more foregathered and their tyrant's menaces no longer rang in their ears, they shook hands silently, commiserating their lot.

"Are you sure 'e's gone?" whispered one more prudent than the rest.

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"Ay—'e's gone right enough," was the answer.

Their hearts were full of the humiliation they had undergone.

"A nice way to treat us! 'E's no better than us."

"He called me a blockhead—*me!*" murmured the boatswain wearily.

A sail shook in the breeze, and instantly silence fell on the group. But it proved a false alarm. If the cook had really overheard, he would have intervened. No; he was far away in his bunk asleep.

Thinking the moment propitious to air the doubts which troubled him, an old sailor spoke up.

"How do we *know* he sees?"

He had launched a bombshell. They were all rough fellows, their natures were very primitive, credulous of all they heard, if it were put in the right way. The cook had

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taken great pains to impose his pretensions. And so they had believed.

But now a fearful doubt assailed them. Little by little the voice of reason strove to make itself heard in their minds. Their very knowledge of the cook's character and personality provided an obstacle to their credulity.

But, alas! poor human nature believes only what it wants to believe, and the crew could not so rudely jettison their fondest hopes.

So muttering, "No, it can't be," and "It's clean impossible," they withstood desperately a growing incredulity.

.
On the following day, when Chittle finally scrambled on deck, he had a distinct feeling that suspicion was rife against him and that the crew were taking definite note of his every word and movement.

He was filled with perturbation. His confidence forsook him. His was a mind so rest-

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less as to anticipate disaster. Already he felt himself a helpless victim in their hands, and he knew that in that case they would crunch his brittle little carcase as ruthlessly as one crunches the shell of a crab.

Startled by the crash of a yard-arm, he bounded into the air, a simple bundle of nerves, momentarily expecting attack. But it was nothing, and he began to concoct means of self-defence.

He did not lack special advantages. The crew as a whole were dull-witted fellows, and he could keep them at arm's length by his superior nimbleness and adroitness. He could, if it became necessary, lead them a pretty dance over the ship! But there were so many of them—what if they got him in their deadly clutches at last? His blood ran cold.

Before his mental gaze he saw, thread by thread, a vast spider's web being spun, stretching in all directions, from which there

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was no escape for his struggling limbs but in death.

All that day the sailors showed a suspicious inclination to draw near him—to draw very near him, indeed—hanging on his every syllable, as if to justify their own private deductions. They would have liked to touch him and question him. Actually to seize the little tyrant's person they did not dare, because, after all, he might really see, and they dreaded exposing themselves to the risk of his vengeance.

To keep them at a safe distance the cook charged them with such a multitude and variety of jobs as his ingenuity could suggest; and they obeyed him. The trembling usurper could hear them groaning and muttering over their labour: unhappy beings, like the very spirits of the damned.

XVI

PIPE in mouth as usual, seated at the table, Captain Wilcox turned slowly the pages of a book. Catching the unaccustomed sound the mate sat up in his berth with an ejaculation of surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked his chief.

"You seem to be reading," replied the mate, with an audible smile.

"Ah, Brand, I have never so much regretted my sight as now. This is a copy of *Rules and Regulations at Sea*. I'd like to know exactly what punishment ought to be handed out to those fellows. . . . Eh, what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything, sir."

The captain thumped the volume in his hand.

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"I know you're all for indulgence. But I tell you they all ought to be put in irons. . . . I will make my report. . . . I will make my report if we ever get back home. . . . But no, everything will be lost . . . these imbeciles will lose my ship—a fine, well-built ship, Brand. You're not going to defend them, I hope."

The mate repudiated the idea.

"To lose *all!* I can picture the bitter anxiety of the owners as they wait and wait and wait for our return. Even now they haven't given up hope. . . . It's terrible! To lose *everything!*"

He went on more mildly:

"I don't think I ever told you, Brand, but I've spent years making an album—an album of pictures: pictures of places all over the world. I don't know anything about it's—it's money value; but you never saw a finer collection of pictures. It's beautiful. It's there—there on that shelf—by your side.

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Yes, the big book; it took me years and years. Pass it to me, will you, Brand? And to think—it will be lost: lost with everything else! It will go down with the ship . . .”

The mate quietly stretched himself out again in his berth.

“It only needed that,” he thought, with his ironic smile.

He heard the pages turn. The captain had taken the big album on his lap, and licking his thumb, set himself to turning the pages, lingeringly, curiously, in the manner of a little child who does not know how to read.

XVII

THE fatigues of the day overcame Chittle's vigilance. With his head bent, in a kind of stupor, he collided with a topsman. He should have avoided him. The seaman grabbed him.

"Ha, you didn't see me, eh?"

Believing himself in danger the cook uttered a loud shout for help. The crew answered his summons. It was no time for half-measures. The cook loudly denounced the topsman as a mutineer, and ordered him instantly to be put in irons. While those standing by hesitated to seize the offender, a bold sailor spoke up,

"Captain Wilcox says the cook can't see!"

At this the cook jumped as if someone had dug their nails into his flesh. Indeed, he never heard the captain spoken of but he

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flamed with anger. This time he fairly snorted with rage, and raising his voice to an unnatural pitch, which would have been impossible to him in his quieter moments, he made the whole ship ring with fierce declamation.

"I can't see? I can't see?" he concluded, while the veins of his temples were ready to burst. "Who, at this very minute, sees the birds flying overhead? I'll tell you—it's your captain—*me!* Who sees those waves yonder covered with flotsam? By God, it's *me!* We're running straight towards the land—don't I know the signs? It's the land—the land. I tell you and—*I* can see it!"

If his eloquence had already deeply stirred them, this last statement drove the crew into a delirium of joy. These poor blind wretches hardly knew what they did. They hugged him, they clung to his garment, they knelt at his feet. Once again they were his abject slaves.

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The cook shook them off. The fact is that his triumph had terrified himself. Had he not gone too far? What would these men, now filled with jubilation, do to him when they learnt the truth?

He began to study how he could diminish the effect of his words—how he could temper the wild ardour of the crew. If they suspected any falsehood, they would fling themselves upon him without mercy; if he sought to withdraw his words they would not hesitate to tear him limb from limb.

He preferred a different death.

It was then that, in his exalted state, Captain Ezra conceived in his puny bosom the idea of a heroic end—an end worthy of his pride and capable of inflicting consternation upon his enemies.

He summoned all his faculties, straightened out his misshapen little body, drawing his muscles so tense that his bones fairly cracked. His resolution was taken.

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"I will quit this scene for ever," he soliloquised; "and I will make the Old Man—Wilcox—jealous of me!"

Deep in these reflections he became aware of the form of the big Danish sailor sidling towards him, with outstretched hand, with which he touched the cook affectionately.

"Ah, dear boy, it's vonderful news you haf told us. It'll make my lettle vife, oh, so happy ven she hear."

The cook roused himself; it was time he was issuing orders.

"All hands to starboard! Make ready to lower a boat!"

This time it was Jimmy who approached to caress him on the shoulder: when it was come to that pass, all the crew were his friends.

"Let me row you ashore, Captain. *I'm* the man for the job. I'll land you in a couple o' strokes."

With a sublime gesture the cook pushed these and other equally handsome offers aside.

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"Curse the whole lot of you!" he exclaimed.
"Stand aside. Now then, lower the boat."

The boat was lowered.

"Are the oars in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let down the rope."

This was done. The cook seized it and let himself down until his feet touched the gunwale of the floating craft. Jimmy, at the other end of the rope, could hardly restrain his enthusiasm.

"To think," he murmured ecstatically, "that I had lost all hope that we would ever land!"

They could hear the boat oscillating on the waves.

"I'm coming to join you, Cooky," called Jimmy, getting astride the swaying rope.

He descended hand over hand, but soon his bare feet touched the surface of the sea.

"Where's the boat?" he called out. With a stroke of his oar the cook had already

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sheered off from the ship. Standing up he delivered with the full strength of his lungs his final message of hate to the row of sightless, peering faces leaning over the taffrail of the *Sea-Shine*:

"So long!—*bon voyage!* to the whole blasted brood of you! I'm quit of you. . . . Get yourselves out of your mess, if you can. As for me, I'm off—alone!"

.
The cook's action is perhaps inexplicable. But human beings are never alike, and the real wonder is that they ever, in any circumstances, act the same. Besides, he had no choice.

.
Emerging from their stupor the blind mariners called loudly to the cook, beseeching him not to abandon them—or at least to indicate the direction and the distance of the shore.

No answer came to their heart-rending appeals. Some amongst them began cursing the

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cook, and swearing they would cut his heart out if ever they laid hands on him again.

The boatswain flew to inform the captain of the cook's base desertion.

"Quick, for God's sake, sir!" he shouted, hammering on the cabin door; "the cook's going off without us. Go up and stop him!"

The door opened and the captain's voice came forth, calm and deliberate.

"What for, bo's'n? The cook is just as blind as the rest of us. He can't see."

Only once before had the boatswain dared to doubt his chief's word; he would not doubt a second time.

Without waiting, therefore, to hear more he dashed up on deck, and bursting in upon the group of sailors, cried,

"The Old Man says the cook is a bloody liar!"

Afterwards, in the long dreary watches of despair—so perverse is human nature—some amongst them still clung to their former faith

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in little Ezra. More than one poor devil was overheard in the depths of his discouragement to mutter, "Well, Cooky at least got safely out of it. We might 'ave got ashore, too, if we'd only 'ad 'is luck!"

As for the captain, his only comment was, "I never would have thought him capable of such a piece of crazy folly."

"He was capable of anything!" rejoined the mate.

One of the men—the Dane—overheard the colloquy, and ventured to say,

"But if he can't see, sir, what will happen to him?"

The mate turned upon him and replied, caustically,

"Well, Karl, if the little rascal's mother isn't dead at this moment, I'll tell you what'll happen. The son will die before the mother."

.
When he perceived himself at last alone on the vast burden of waters, far out of hail

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of any human voice, the cook threw himself down so violently to the bottom of the boat that the muddy bilge-water spattered him all over.

"So this is what I've done to myself!" he wailed. "Oh, Christ!"

He rolled over and over in the foul brine, dabbling his hands in it, without courage to rise. At last he struggled to a sitting posture, hugging his body, for already he shivered with cold. One thought alone came to console him—the hated captain and crew of the *Sea-Shine* thought him safely ashore. At this very moment, how they envied him!

But this malicious pleasure did not last. At every instant the remorseless ocean tapped at his frail bark, as one taps at a door. And it had scarce more thickness than a door. On its other side was Eternity.

The years of torment and humiliation of his misshapen manhood rolled away: the cook became a child again. He crossed himself,

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clasped his hands, uttered the name of God, and waited.

He waited a long time—he did not know how long. At last, one night a wave, larger than its fellows, rolled athwart his boat, where he crouched crazily sucking the blood from his bitten hand, and mercifully capsized it.

XVIII

THE *Sea-Shine*, her rigging in a deplorable state, her hull freighted with barnacles, struggled on her erratic course with ever-increasing difficulty. The crew, since the cook's desertion, did little but wait for their deliverance, suffering meanwhile all the agonies of impatience.

The ship's spread of canvas had been much reduced through dread of squalls, which could not be foreseen. Often the sailors, in their nervous desperation, would lay hold of the nearest rope and haul upon it like mad, as if to hoist some invisible topsail which would accelerate the vessel's slow progress. At other times they would all line up together, and gripping the hand-rail, sway their bodies to and fro in unison for hours, as if by this

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fatuous proceeding they were helping the unhappy three-master along.

But generally they were to be found stretched out listlessly on deck, refusing all food and abandoned utterly to melancholy.

If ever the members of a watch aroused for duty ran up on deck, it was due to the nature of their dreams. They had dreamt that their sight was restored to them. Once out in the open air they stood stock-still, indecisive, as if uncertain that it was not the blackness of night they saw, and that the sun would duly rise in the heavens to dazzle their eyes once more.

No such dolorous victim of his infirmity was the captain. He was far too engrossed in the care and navigation of his ship to think of anything else. He paced the deck continually, paying particular attention to the creaking of the yards and mainstays. Occasionally, he would thrust out a hand, as if to weigh some

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object, and attempt to calculate the relative position of his vessel in this vast darkness.

He failed to achieve any practical advantage from his geometrical speculations, and those great imaginary lines which traverse the globe remained as imaginary as ever.

The captain was often so absorbed in these abstruse calculations of his that occasionally he would bump into one of the crew, busy carrying out his orders. At such times he would give the man a push and growl in his customary tone,

"Look out, you clumsy lubber. Don't you see where you're going?"

See where you're going! The poor mariner found this phrase of the Old Man very strange, and went off scratching his head in a puzzled way.

Matters went on thus for days, without any incident to withdraw the crew from their lethargy. Then, suddenly, an event happened

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which swept them off their feet and filled their souls to overflowing with a new hope.

For a strange voice arose out of the deep. This time there could be no mistake—it could be no illusion. It was the voice of a man—a stranger—who hailed them.

“Ahoy, there! Ship ahoy!”

Paralysis seemed to seize upon them. They lined up and leant over the railing of the *Sea-Shine*, but they could not reply.

“Ahoy there!” the voice spoke again, but in a changed accent. “*Are you—are you men—or demons?*”

XIX

THE *Blue Star* was a small cargo-boat, commanded by a certain Captain Keller.

Keller was a famous character on the high seas, which he had sailed incessantly from boyhood. Perhaps his most notable trait was his curiosity, which was insatiable. He never passed a ship if he could help it without hailing her; he never sighted a wreck that he didn't come alongside. He knew the personal histories of all his crew, including his stokers: even the history, although brief, of his cabin-boy, who did not know the name of his mother.

Such was the commander who, sighting the *Sea-Shine* in distress, her canvas reduced and in tatters, instantly suspected something was wrong.

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When he learnt that this mysterious vessel, which hung out a signal of distress, failed to pay the slightest attention to his own signals, he rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"By Jupiter! I wonder what's happened. I must go and see."

He ordered a boat to be lowered, and in a short space of time the worthy Captain Keller was alongside. At first the ship seemed derelict—not a soul in sight. He sent up a shout, and straightway a row of the strangest looking beings he had ever seen started up, leaning out over the side.

Were these blinking, shaggy, grimy creatures really men?

At this juncture the strong voice of the skipper rang out.

"This is Captain Wilcox, commanding the *Sea-Shine*.

"Ah," cried the other; "I am Captain Keller of the *Blue Star* steamship out from Liverpool. I've come over to see what's hap-

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pened to you. I thought just now that——”

“Come aboard,” interrupted Wilcox; “we have a lot to tell you.”

He tried to locate the voices in the boat, and ordered the rope ladder to be lowered at the spot where he adjudged his visitor was afloat. The crew of the *Sea-Shine* capered about like madmen—desperately anxious not to miss a single word of the colloquy—tumbling over one another in their eagerness to be of help.

“Take hold of the rope, Captain Keller,” said Wilcox again.

But the other seemed filled with surprise.

“But where are you looking, Captain? I am here. Can’t you see me?”

Nearest to him, leaning far out, was the topman Jimmy, who was bursting with a desire to explain their common plight.

“No, he can’t, sir. We’re all blind.”

“Wha—at!” cried Keller, aghast; “all of you?”

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"Don't listen to him," hurriedly interposed the skipper of the *Sea-Shine*, who realised in a flash the danger of such a premature avowal.

"Why shouldn't 'e listen?" demanded Jimmy querulously. "We're all stone-blind, from the skipper down'ards. An' we took it—the whole lot of us like yellow-jack!"

"Yellow-jack!" echoed Keller, startled. "Then—then it's contagious. You're down with contagion—you're——"

He dropped down instantly on his seat in the boat's bow.

All this time the oarsmen had been filled with wonderment, although silent. Now, without waiting for their captain's orders, they plunged their oars into the waves and made again towards the ship they had left. Their fright was real; nothing could stop them. Keller stood up and shouted out a message of encouragement.

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"Hold hard! I'll come back! I'll be back soon."

Once again, on the deck of the *Blue Star*, it needed all the comfort afforded by the best part of a bottle of old rum, tendered him by his chief engineer, to restore Captain Keller to his equanimity.

Finding himself better, he summoned the mate, the second mate, the chief engineer, and the boatswain to a conference. He put before them the whole of the terrible tragedy he had witnessed, which he confessed had utterly unnerved him, and asked them what each would do in his place.

They were all deeply moved, although they had already heard about the plight of the blind ship from the two terrified sailors who had accompanied the captain.

"Well," said the mate, at length, "I don't much fancy going blind, but I mustn't think only of myself. The crew must be protected."

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The others were of the same way of thinking. The chief engineer was emphatic.

"We ought to steam away at full speed," he said. "We must put at least a hundred knots between us and them. Their ship is infected—how do we know that the germs are not at this moment flying about in the wind?"

"I would certainly like to help the poor devils," declared the captain, with emotion.

"But, sir," protested the boatswain, "there are our own men."

"That's true," agreed Keller.

He strode up and down the cabin for a time, lost in conflicting thoughts.

"Very well," he decided at last. "We must abandon all notion of helping them. I dare not expose my crew to the risk."

When his officers had gone, he sighed heavily.

"By God! I would gladly give five years of my life not to have seen that sight."

.

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On board the *Sea-Shine* they awaited the promised succour. The friendly skipper would soon return. It was hard for the crew to contain its feelings. With locked arms some of the men beat up and down the deck, singing as if they were already entering harbour; others, with tears of joy running down their cheeks, danced a jig in couples.

Wilcox himself took the wheel. He had shortened sail and wished to manœuvre the ship as much as possible about the same place. But he was under no illusions.

"This fellow has had a fright, and he won't come back. I'm certain of that. . . . Besides, I myself, with a sound crew, would have done the same in his place. If I had had time I might have tried to borrow a couple of his men, with a big bribe. Two fellows of the old breed would have dared the risk for five hundred pounds apiece. At least he could have sent us a boat-load of rations. If only

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I had a chance of asking Keller our latitude and longitude."

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Doubtless, it will not be till the Day of Judgment that the excruciating pangs endured by the much-tortured crew of the *Sea-Shine*, when the stranger did not return, will be revealed.

"My lads, we must count on nobody but ourselves," the captain had announced.

He had delivered his orders to make sail. The boatswain had duly sounded his whistle. But as the latter said ruefully, they had their hearts in their boots and their souls on their backs, and they responded incoherently, like men whose faculties were completely benumbed.

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The strange encounter of Captain Keller and the two sailors on the high seas was never

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entered in the log. Only, one night in a Glasgow drinking-house a half-drunken stoker started to tell the story to a woman, but had not proceeded far when he was interrupted by an irascible sailor of the old school, who scouted the idea of there ever being any "cargo of rotting men" on any sailing-ship that ever hoisted canvas.

"'Cause w'y?" he demanded with a string of fine old-fashioned mariner's oaths. "I'll tell you—it's all along o' the tar. Now, on a steam vessel——"

His remarks being resented, the pair forthwith engaged in a battle of fisticuffs, in which the champion of sails and tar nearly killed the stoker, who had better have held his tongue.

XX

ALL day long they had a presentiment of storm. There was no wind. The air was parched and pervaded by restless electrical currents. The beards of the crew crisped and shrivelled under the touch of their fingers, and their nerves were strangely agitated. The queerest, grimmest thoughts sprang up in their heads, such as that the ship had capsized and emptied them all down—down into another world. . . .

The captain strode about with his palms wide open, as if to catch up those volatile substances which fill the void of space, and somehow deduce from them the secrets of the sky, the situation of the sun, of latitude and longitude. But, alas, he could seize nothing. In his anguish he was silent.

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But, at any rate, he was once again in undisputed charge of his ship. A few paces distant the loyal mate awaited his orders, while the crew, with muscles tense and jaws set, stood by, striving to conceal their impatience. What, they thought, were they all waiting for now? What was it the skipper expected to happen? A divine revelation? A miracle?

Was not the end at last approaching? What would become of the unhappy ship? The captain expected a storm which would carry away everything. A ship caught in such a tempest would crack and be smashed to fragments, like an egg-shell under a man's heel.

In which quarter did the storm lurk? How could one prepare to evade it? How could one get the ship ready to weather a tornado which might burst upon them from any side? The waves gave no indication, they ran in all directions, seeming to turn round and round.

The captain ordered all sails reefed and

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made fast and the hatches battened down.

The quality of the sun's rays altered, and now they emitted less heat. Although it was hidden from those on board the doomed ship, the sea began to assume a hard, vitreous aspect, as if its whole surface were gradually solidifying.

"Something's going to happen," thought the captain, "of which we won't see the end."

He passed his hand over his eyes, as if to efface the mental shadow which troubled him; but it remained.

"Yes," he continued, "this time it is all over with us. I've been through a lot of misfortune—more than any other captain, probably. But if I must die, at least I'll die as a sailor should. It's better to . . ."

A hammer in his hand and breathing in a laboured way, the mate came towards his chief.

"Hatches all battened down, sir. Only the hold hatchway loose in case of necessity.

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Dirty weather ahead, I fear, sir. Your feet stick to the deck as if you were walking on glue, and not a breath of wind."

"Ay—that'll come. All our sails reefed, eh? Good—leave the spanker. If the shock isn't too heavy, we'll see. For the moment we can only sit tight. Don't go, Brand. Stand by the helmsman. Give him a hand. Two's not too many. Don't let it strike us broadside on—if possible."

He moistened his parched lips.

"One breathes nothing but sand," he muttered, chokingly.

Then out of the heavy leaden sky a great drop fell, as noisily as if a sailor had spat on the deck. It was succeeded by immense descending pillars of rain. The air was shaken by a mighty flash and crash of thunder, as if a whole arsenal of shells had exploded, and the waves, uprearing to the size of battle-ships, seemed to echo with the terrific impact of sound.

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A great wall of sky crumbled. The tempest leapt like a demon through the vent, and whirled tumultously over the face of the deep. The *Sea-Shine*, smitten on her flank, half turned over, shipping tons of water, and was carried at that perilous angle for over a mile. Then, her timbers groaning deeply, she righted herself, to receive the fury of a succession of fierce squalls, which pounded her sides as if she were in a brazier.

"It hasn't really begun yet," murmured the captain. "The big seas are to come, and already the *Sea-Shine* is behaving badly. That's because she's badly manned and navigated. . . . But how can I help that?"

The single sail was torn from the mizzenmast, and crashed down with its yards to the deck, where it flapped and bellied like a phantom.

Soaked through and with bleeding fingers, the crew strove manfully amidst the débris in obedience to the orders roared from their

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skipper's throat, and were half drowned by the gale. Suddenly their movements ceased, with an abrupt change in the behaviour of the sea.

"What's up now?" cried the captain. As he spoke a gigantic wave uprose and crashed down upon the deck, catching up the helmsman, wrenching him from the wheel. He gave a despairing wail,

"Oh, my God!"

The wheel released, spun around madly. The *Sea-Shine* whirled about in the trough of the sea. The sailors, overwhelmed, found themselves dashed about the deck, finding themselves at length washed into a corner, from whence they arose stunned, only to receive the furious impact of another wave.

The *Sea-Shine* plunged wildly, like a dying fish, then momentarily recovered her equilibrium, with the water surging level with her railing on all sides.

The breakers rose to incredible heights, col-

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liding in mid-air with a noise like cannon. The tumult was so great that the sailors could no longer hear the sound of the storm. Their ears became deafened. Soon the raging tempest ceased to trouble them: their only concern was how to elude the tormenting flood which was slowly drowning them, besides mercilessly bruising their bodies. It struck them, rolled them about, entered their throats and lungs, choking them. Their every breath was a sob.

Their stomachs were filled with sea-water. During their brief respites they were seized with fits of vomiting. Sometimes, with their remaining strength, they set to hacking at the masts with hatchets, as a measure of safety.

All at once a new premonition seized these hapless beings; they had the sensation of a disaster so immense, that none could surprise the secret and survive.

"This time it's coming!" each man mur-

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mured to himself in his own fashion, and nerved himself to meet certain death.

Air and water shook horribly. It was if the ocean lifted up its bulk for hundreds of leagues, exposing whole continents in an endeavour to reach to the sky, amassing itself in a single wave. The firmament felt the contact and quivered, its invisible supports gave way, and the crew could hear it rushing to its fall. Their hearts stopped beating, and they awaited the final thunder which would mark the end of the world.

But it never came.

Beneath the watery vastness, leagues upon leagues below, the earth must have trembled and carried its tremor to the very roots of the poles.

They never knew how their vessel received the shock. They clung to the rigging for their lives, and the sea passed over them.

.

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The mate became aware that he was bleeding at the mouth. He had hardly felt it, and yet several front teeth had been smashed in.

"It was worse than any fist blow I ever got!" he reflected, still calmly. "A rum go, and no mistake! I wonder where the others are? It is madness not to have shut ourselves all up in the hold. . . . And it's not over yet. . . ."

He heard and felt the great waves still rolling and leaping, and wondered at his own persistence.

"What's the good of struggling? What curious force is it makes me clench my hands and my teeth when the water lays hold of me, instead of letting go and ending it all? Is such a life as mine is now worth such an effort? Why try to preserve it at all?"

Again a powerful wave struck him full, felling him to the deck. His fingers closed tightly upon a rope, and although for some moments submerged he held on grimly. No

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sooner could he snatch a breath than his brain resumed its workings.

"I certainly have a frame of steel—not even that last one was enough to break me. My life may not be worth much, but I seem determined to hold on. I wonder what's really happening? I've never heard such a hellish row. Are the old ship's timbers still keeping together? What about the crew? I can understand these poor devils having the fear of death, but what possible hope is left for them? As for me, I . . ."

The sea leapt up and dealt him such a blow that his hold loosened. It seemed as if this time he must be washed overboard, but the water receded, leaving him writhing on deck.

His eye, so long sightless, had been gashed open. But salt, like fire, cauterises a wound.

"It's funny I don't faint and drop overboard, and dissolve into the elements. My tenacity is really rather curious. Is it per-

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haps I still have the power of hearing left—that some whisper of the eternal harmonies still rings in my ears, and bids me live? But why should I live, when life has become——”

Once again the fury of the flood enveloped him.

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The crew never knew by whose orders they repaired alongside the captain. They crept along, clinging desperately to every rigid object within reach, sometimes lifted up bodily by the waves, upon whose crest they floated like seaweed.

But somehow they groped along with their bruised bodies and foregathered in the vicinity of their chief. Although they heard nothing and saw nothing, some new-found spiritual faculty within them caused them to divine his wishes.

They slid one by one down a half-opened hatchway into the hold. Masses of water

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rushed inwards with them, pitching them, half dead, into the bowels of the ship. How did they contrive to shut themselves in—to interpose a barrier against the intruding water? They never knew. They accomplished their task stolidly, yet swiftly, like machines. The mate, stunned and reeling, streaming with blood, worked with the rest, unthinkingly. A passionate longing for sleep seized him—a sleep which has no waking.

The *Sea-Shine* groaned unceasingly. The storm still thundered on, the waves beating its sides. The hull splintered. The main-mast was uprooted. The water which had poured into the ship heaved about from side to side like fluid in a swinging cauldron, dragging even ponderous objects with it, dashing itself against the bedraggled groups of sailors and detaching the piled-up sacks of cargo.

The crew, their teeth chattering and their hearts beating with terror, strove to keep to-

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gether. They had no idea how long the tempest lasted. They had no longer any sane ideas about anything. They had become utterly stupefied. They were no longer men: time had ceased to exist for them; they were utterly without any notion of hours, or colours, or the joys of life. They had become things, and like all inanimate things, dead.

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Then, as a train suddenly arrested, it stopped. The brakes of Nature had been applied, and brusquely, belching sparks, still ardent with steam, the inevitable halt came at the end of the journey.

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Slowly the sailors regained possession of all their faculties save sight. Those thoughts which constitute the soul of man struggled back into being. They lifted themselves, groaning heavily. The waters streamed from their garments, which lay on their limbs like

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lead, and moved about heavily, awkwardly, as if wading in water up to their middle.

When they had at length wiped their faces, partially wrung out their drenched clothing shaken themselves, they called out for food. A number of men at first were silent. The roll was called by the captain, and it was found that several were still in a stupor and unable to respond to their names. One—Thomas Burden—was missing.

"He was close to me, sir," explained one sailor; "but he didn't come along."

"Drowned," spoke up another.

Perhaps if they had eaten food they would not have become such victims of their physical weakness. But in spite of all they had hitherto resisted and survived, it seemed as if it only needed the incident of their shipmate's death to cause them to break down utterly. They wept—loudly, unrestrainedly—like children.

It was too much for the captain. He stood

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it for some time, and then called out impatiently,

“There—don’t go on blubbering like idiots! You’ve got other and better things to do, my lads.”

They dispersed in search of dry kit, but it seemed as if every one of their belongings they laid hands on was saturated. Some articles were missing altogether, and distressing re-criminations arose. Suddenly they heard the mate’s voice:

“All hands on deck!”

They believed it was a signal for food, for they were famished, and made a scramble to-towards the cook’s galley. What a terrible disillusion awaited them!

How little they knew of the despair of the young topsman who had replaced the cook at the time of that worthy’s treacherous desertion! Now, haggard and shivering, he stood about amidst the indescribable confusion of his

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wrecked galley, seeking in vain to place his hands upon the needful utensils. The problem was too much for him—he could not solve it. Already a sailor had thrust his nose in to ask,

“’Ere—when are you going to give us a drop o’ hot pea-soup, Cooky?”

Hot soup! Christ! How was he going to make it? With what? In what?

He stood fumbling, a pitiful figure in his abject weakness and confusion.

Outside, the captain addressed the men. He hid nothing from them of the plight of the ship: they might as well know all. The hurricane had rendered the *Sea-Shine* a wreck. The masts were snapped off and had gone overboard. Nearly everything of use had been carried away. The vessel could no longer be navigated, and was now at the mercy of wind and water.

“Then this time we are lost!”

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It came as a groan from one of the men.

"Well, if there's to be any more of it, the end can't come too quick for me," said another miserably.

At moments of supreme spiritual crisis, each human being always reveals his race. Its expression rises as naturally to his lips as his last breath. At the very moment when a doomed man is about to leave the earth for ever he reveals most the characteristic spirit of the race from which he sprang. It was the voice of countless generations of his agonised countrymen that surged for utterance in the soul of the Russian. The blood left his temples, a tremor shook his gaunt frame; he stood erect, a fierce and accusing prophet.

"God's curse is upon you all!" he screamed. "This punishment is come—is come from God Almighty, because you are all wicked sinners!"

Sudden as it was, the accusation went home with a pang to each bosom. They knew it

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—they knew it! It was true! Their heads drooped penitently.

The Slav went on, his voice gradually mounting in pitch to a shriek,

“I see you!”

The phrase made them start and tremble. “I see you! I look now at your true faces. Oh, you are liars, blasphemers, hypocrites, everything zat is most wicked. I see you as Christ will soon see you, an’ make ze judgment upon you. On your knees—O you sinners—on your knees, and ask for pardon before it is too late!”

Abashed by these fierce maledictions, the head of the captain, following the example of his crew, sunk still lower on his chest, even if he didn’t actually drop upon his knees. For he was innately pious. The mate, on the other hand, could not boast so simple or so solid a faith, and was overheard to mutter callously,

“A pretty waste of time, this!”

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His lips probably wore the same mocking smile which rarely left them in moments of stress.

His commanding officer, who had temporarily fallen under the spell of the fanatical Russian, even to rubbing shoulders with his remorse-stricken crew, suddenly remembered that, after all, miserable sinner as he was, he was not in church, and that he still had certain secular responsibilities.

Moreover, he tried to believe that this timely reminder had not come from the mate.

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They endeavoured, under the captain's orders, to rig up a jury-mast and to stitch together some sails. It was a tedious business. Again and again they had to make a fresh beginning. Often a sailor ruined by mistake the painful labour of hours.

Besides, they no longer possessed the same

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understanding amongst themselves. Each man conceived a different way of doing the work in hand. That impeded progress.

It was the captain who charged himself with the task of joining up the various materials and instructing each man what he was to do; but his touch could not be everywhere, and his job was a hard one.

Yet the deck presented the aspect of a busy shipyard. They rolled spars of various lengths about, hunted for and fetched rope-ends and cables, assembling every object which might prove useful from every corner of the ship. Wilcox towered amongst them, no longer indecisive, dealing constant blows with his hammer, perspiring freely beneath the hot rays of the sun, inciting them all to an equal activity.

For three days and nights they toiled thus without sleep, and still the work was not finished. Meanwhile, the mate was cutting down the rations with each successive meal.

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Aided by the new cook he had tried to catch fish, but in spite of all their efforts the fish eluded them, and their lines and nets were drawn in empty. The water-supply became lower daily, and what remained in the casks had a foul, acrid taste. Yet it was too precious to give each man more than a few spoonfuls, besides what was needed for soup. They set up a cistern on deck to collect water if it rained.

Quickly exhausted now, tormented by wants and desires, it was difficult to keep the men at any work. They puffed and coughed at the least physical exertion; and if the burden was only moderately heavy, they staggered about until they fell beneath its weight.

Emanciated through privation, it seemed as if the very air they breathed was too strong, and its resonance afflicted their sense of hearing. They grew more irritable and petulant than ever.

At length the job was done, the improvised

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mast was set up, and the wind blew softly through the new shrouds. Then the sail was hoisted.

The breeze was feeble enough. They heard the ropes stretch taut, and they felt that at last the ship was making way under canvas, however scant. It was for them a mighty moment.

They told themselves that little by little they were nearing land and their salvation. Dwelling as they did constantly in the shadows, they lived upon hope—upon the expectation of their deliverance. They would be picked up, or else cast upon some friendly shore. Whatever it was, or howsoever their rescue came, it was due to their own efforts—to their own pluck and perseverance.

Some day, perhaps close at hand, in some pleasant hospital, where life passes as sweetly as in the fragrant shadow of a tree, out of the heat of the sun, they would feel the caress of white sheets upon their weary limbs. In that shadow soft-spoken nurses would tend them

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and minister to their every want. In those sympathetic ears they could pour out the story of their long sufferings. And afterwards, slowly, gently, under these tender ministrations, the shadows would lift and the light—the blessed light of Heaven—would return to their eyes, and they would see.

They would again mingle freely in the world whose beautiful image is reflected in the eyes of those who can see. And perhaps, too, some dearly-loved being, as much a part of themselves as the heart in their bosoms, would dwell for ever at their side, so that they would grow old together; such a being they would draw in a tender embrace and listen again and again to the sweet avowal, uttered between their sobs, "Oh, my dear, dear, dear lad o' mine . . . I waited so long . . . I was so unhappy. . . . If you only knew how unhappy I was, dear lad!"

Such would be the confessions, in a time of

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happy reunion, of the days of past unhappiness.

The *Sea-Shine* pitched and rolled, rose and fell on the waves, creaking and straining her timbers, but still ever moving onward.

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Out of the profundity of the heavens the fresh squall descended. This time it was brief. In its passage it rent the sail asunder, destroyed the mast and scattered the crew, who ran for their lives to take refuge in the poop. The damage done, the sky cleared and all became peaceful again. Deprived of her mast the *Sea-Shine* uttered a great sigh, and yielded herself once more to the caprice of the waves.

Such was the end. All their powers of resistance exhausted, the crew made no further struggle. They could only lie still and await whatever destiny was in store for them. It might be that chance would send a vessel,

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which would see and rescue them. But against this was to be reckoned the length and breadth of the ocean.

But were they, then, only the victims of the blind forces of Chance? Did there not, somewhere, exist a puissant intelligence which had malevolently decreed and devised their destruction, accumulated the causes of their misfortune, amusing itself with them, revelling in their sinister destiny with a refinement of cruelty?

Sailors were they all, and they knew the sea: it crushes and drowns its victims, but it does not blind them. There exists a harmonious equilibrium between the sea's power and the resistance of human beings. The sea does not persecute.

And so the idea came to them that some Devil or Deity took pleasure in their torments, in the sight of their rent and bleeding bodies, of the tears which welled up in their sightless sockets. They imagined that some mon-

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strous god loomed over them, so they could smell his sulphurous breath. Night and day they were being exultantly watched; monstrous eyes, horrible, piercing, mocking, were fastened upon them to detect and enjoy any proof of weakness or suffering, so that in their pride they one and all strove to render their faces impassive—to give no sign of the slow agony which was inwardly consuming them.

XXI

THE sailor in charge of the store-room, gave them the news in a voice which was weak with anxiety. "There is only enough food left for two days."

Then they knew that death was near, and that before it came, they would suffer. Hunger and thirst would make them delirious. They were still strong and ready to fight. They clenched their fists, determined to fight the death which was coming to conquer them. They would not die without a struggle, but they knew what their life would be during the next few days.

They could see themselves standing up, on guard like a prize-fighter, but there would be nothing in front of them to strike. Hours would pass, monotonous as sand falling in an hour glass, but they would be on the alert against death. Nevertheless, it would sur-

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prise them, seize them by the scruff of the neck, and force them to their knees. They would get up again, breathe the salt air, and wait again with an indomitable determination to live.

Then death would jump upon them like a jungle beast, and they would wrestle with it and break away; but it would catch them again, and the fight would go on and on. The claws of their hunger would tear at their vitals. Rather than to lie like dead men, they would rise again. They would lean against the bulwark nettings, then try to escape, as does one who has been thoroughly thrashed.

With a leap, death would be on their shoulders, would crush them down again and the weight of it would rest on their chests, until the death rattle was in their throats. Beaten, they wouldn't even try to crawl away, to shout to the Ocean "I'm hungry!" or "Help!"

There, then, they would lie, inert. A breeze or a fog would bring them to their

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senses. They would open their eyes; still, nothing but the blackness of night. Then would come dreams. They would hear the others screaming or raving in delirium.

That's what would happen. Things like that always happened to hungry, shipwrecked men. Then they die, little by little. Their hearts would beat, stop beating, start again, and finally stop dead, as worried little animals stop dead when frightened by some danger from which they cannot escape. The men knew their lot. The hours ahead of them seemed endless, for they were entering into the eternity of death.

"Are you there?" said the captain, aware that someone was near.

"Yes sir, I'm here," answered the mate.

"Well, this is the end. Don't blame me if later I hit you, or grab you by the throat—blame thirst! But don't drink sea-water. You never know your luck—sometimes crews are rescued at the last minute, so tell the men

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won't you, not to drink sea-water. Sorry if I've been harsh with you—sorry."

The mate felt that the captain had said all that there was to be said, from his point of view. Some men don't need to do much talking to say what they have on their minds. Thinking that the captain was trying to shake his hand, he reached out and found the captain's. It was like the good-bye one says after a voyage, when there is little hope of meeting again.

The captain picked up the photograph of his wife and children and buttoned it inside his shirt.

The rippling sea bore the *Sea-Shine* on her rudderless course. She drifted on her way to join the company of phantom ships.

XXII

SHE was called the *Princess Mary*. She shone, the whole pointed mass of her, like a great steel blade set on edge high above the surface of the water, or like a polished, beautifully-wrought steel shell, speeding from some mammoth howitzer. Across the ocean she took her flight, the Union Jack fluttering at her bows.

Within, above the sound of her engines, rose the music of a negro jazz band, the members of which resembled so many black varnished pumps, violently engaged in pumping up harmony from the deep.

An infatuated shark followed in the wake of the liner : his eyes had perhaps caught sight of a beautiful American girl, a famous cinema star, who would have made a delicious morsel.

Besides the cinema star, this floating castle

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carried in its gilt-and-mahogany-lined interior four English lords, two foreign Ministers, and several American millionaires.

With each pitch of the vessel the angle of the sky altered, so that when night came thousands of stars floated and swam in the profundity of the deep.

When Lady Sedley had swallowed the last amber drop in her crystal goblet she turned to the commander of the *Princess Mary*. He was a fine fellow—the captain: so cool and courageous withal, that if the ocean had opened beneath his ship and total destruction was imminent, he would have lit a cigarette in order to perish with a better grace, issued his command, firmly and placidly, and gone down finally with his vessel. Moreover, he was a lady's man, and frequently sang, with a fine baritone voice, a sentimental ballad in the saloon. His social accomplishments were much appreciated by the directors of the Transoceanic Company.

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He greeted Lady Sedley with a smile, quite heedless of the circumstance that the lady possessed a tall husband in the background.

"What a lovely evening, Captain!" she said, breathing in the crisp ozone. A magnetic current seemed to pervade the vessel beneath their feet. It was the vibration of the massive engines.

The captain smiled, touching his cap, and adjusted his pace to that of his fair and aristocratic passenger.

"Have you seen the frock of our Hollywood princess?" she asked maliciously. It was the talk of the ship.

The captain lowered his eyes diplomatically: he had the air of one who might say a good deal on the subject, but must say nothing at all. At that moment the fourth officer approached and saluted.

"Well?" inquired his commander.

"A wreck sighted to starboard, sir. Looks like a three-master."

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"Ah! Can you make out her name?"

"Yes, sir. The *Sea-Shine*, sir."

"Have you made signals?"

"Yes, sir. They don't answer."

"Oh—h!" cried Lady Sedley, the rose of her cheek paling on the instant. "A wreck! A great ship wrecked!" She became deeply concerned. "Perhaps there are people—the crew—still on board!"

Her lovely eyes stared across over the expanse of waters.

The captain stole a glance of admiration at his fair companion, and despite his years felt his pulses beat quicker. The fourth officer also looked, and ventured to add, addressing her,

"They don't reply at all."

She turned upon him quickly.

"Oh, but if they can't—if they haven't the strength to reply?"

Her eyes filled with tears, as her quick fancy conjured up all the pathos of an ocean tragedy.

THE BLIND SHIP

A stout passenger came up with a telescope; resting his protuberant midriff against the rigging, he adjusted the lenses and gazed fixedly at the distant wreck. Then he stood up and smiled.

"It's a whaler," he announced, with an air of authority.

Facing the captain, Lady Sedley clasped her jewelled fingers in an attitude of sweet supplication.

"Oh, Captain, how terrible! Suppose there are still some poor people on board! Oughtn't you to make sure?"

The susceptible commander was touched. Personally, he believed all derelicts to be uninhabited.

"It's altogether against rules, your Ladyship, to change the ship's course, unless in case of serious accident. But," he went on, with a bow and a smile, "to oblige you I will give orders to slow down and send a motor-launch to make enquiries."

THE BLIND SHIP

He was on the point of turning away when the lady's noble husband intervened.

"Come, come, my dear, don't you see that you mustn't bother the captain?"

The captain, who was secretly glad of an excuse for not issuing an order disagreeable to him, paused and said smilingly,

"If it will make Lady Sedley happy, of course I——"

But her Ladyship had no wish to provoke her lord's ill-temper or to make a scene for the unknown, and perhaps non-existent, objects of her compassion.

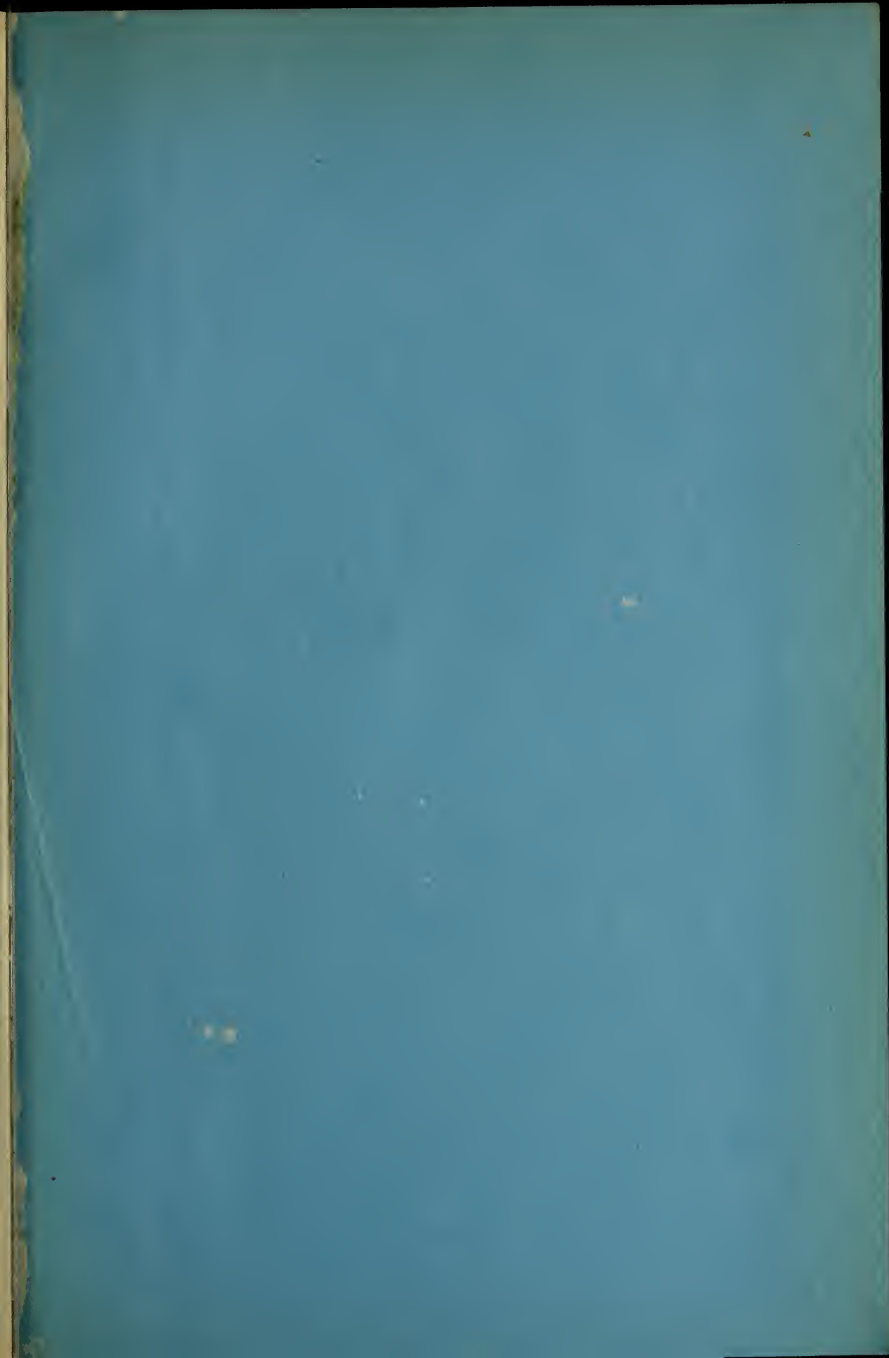
"Please don't trouble on my account, Captain," she hastened to say. "I thank you all the same." She lowered her voice. "It is always like this—I can do nothing or say nothing in the presence of others without my husband coming to criticise, to interfere—without his. . .

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